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BOWES & BOWES . CAMBRIDGE

## EDITORIAL NOTE

THE country is today immersed in a struggle for life and death — at least so we are told. None can deny the very deep foundation of truth contained in these customary jeremiads, which have with repetitions become almost vulgar, banal and commonplace. There is, however, an error which it is essential not to overlook. Life is *never* placed between such extremes, except in so far as we may choose to use the terms of metaphysics and poetry. In this, the twentieth century, the retreat from the optimism of the golden days of Victoria and Edward VII, has been obvious, and we have entered — as far as psychological analysis goes — an age of neuroses, crises and tensions. The growing tendency in modern times towards the extremism of millenarian optimism and cataclysmic pessimism is one which reveals itself more frequently in the practical as well as the speculative affairs of men. We have talked so much about the decline of the West that deep in our consciousness we now accept it unresistingly as a fact, and many are prepared to hasten it on in the name of history. An abstract and remote transcendentalism is contrasted with terrestrial materialism, the anarchism of the intellectual with the totalitarianism of the politician, the despair of the churchman and poet with the confidence of the engineer and the planner.

Such are the characteristics of our day. With all the talk of a 'common man' who (thank heaven) has never really existed, extreme solutions are proposed which not even that mythical personality would either accept or merit. Instead, in an age when it has become almost a fetish to talk of intellectual tolerance, political intolerance prevails over an increasingly large area. Torquemada is at once condemned or understood by the terms of historical thinking only to be dismissed; but the old inquisition is followed by the new — on this occasion at Nuremberg, Warsaw, Paris and Cologne. Guilt is presumed before trial, and lawyers, ecclesiastics and politicians abandon in all innocence the principles upon which they were reared. Psychologists run wild upon the terrain of politics, and men discuss with all seriousness questions relating to the existence or not of collective guilt to which their predecessors would not have troubled themselves to find an answer.

The *clerics* as a class have often been accused of high treason to the noble cause for which they reputedly stand. In older times, to know thyself was a first and final maxim of human behaviour; to-day this elementary principle of human action is lost in an orgy of self-righteousness and blindness. The nazis and the communists

proscribe merely on account of the accidents of race or class; it is not quite so certain that we here in England, reared in a cooler intellectual climate, have either the knowledge or the will to be as detached or dispassionate as we pride ourselves to be, or as we should. It has, for example, become the fashion to write about the Russian and the German problems as if they naturally fell into an essentially different category from our own. Books and pamphlets have been written on the decline of quality of the German academic world, and Treitschke, Mommsen, Willamowitz-Moellendorf and even Koch along with many others are seen as the inevitable forerunners of Baumler, Brandt, Bartels, Blunt, Stieve, Stark, and of course, Rosenberg. The trends in the thought of the more western countries which (if politics had taken, or in the future do take, a different course) might have issued in similar aberrations are ignored. To see only the mote in your neighbour's eye is certainly not a new vice; in days when public opinion and propaganda go hand in hand, it may have grave material consequences.

Spengler as a philosopher (if happily not as a human being) has no more depressing implications than Lord Russell; Halford MacKinder is as indifferent to the human obstacles of geopolitics as Haushofer. Fluegel and Freud can just as easily be misused in the service of an evil cause as their German counterparts, who ultimately were cited in support of the imbecilities of Blut and Seele. Nietzsche no more directly led to the Fuehrerprinzip than Huxley or reputable interpreters of Darwin led to either marxism or to total relativity of moral and political behaviour.

To assert or to feel that the right is overwhelmingly with us is to forget at once the teachings of Christ and the lessons of history. The real task is not so much to do with the re-education of others as with the seeking of the fault that is in ourselves. We often remark today on the peculiar Russian habits of maintaining an iron wall around their intellectuals, and fail to realise how long we have sedulously been occupied in isolating the German intelligentsia from contact with the West through the usual intermediary of congresses and conferences. The international ties which have been so often declared (when useful) to bind the *clerics* of all countries are, indeed, very slight.

The universities have frequently lagged behind the times, and have as social institutions had little to do with the changes in public life during the last century. Perhaps it is good that the universities have little to do with the inculcation of professed 'social consciousness'. Their business is both more practical and more spiritual. Practical in that they provide their alumni with a certain technical skill available only to an educated intelligentsia; spiritual in that they help to provide some of the essential general ideas upon

which a civilised and wise society must base its existence. The intellectual leaders have always praised the virtues of tolerance, charity and temperance, and within the sphere of the nation British universities have had an excellent record. In the case of nations and states elsewhere, we cannot claim to have exercised so wise or so successful an influence — particularly where former and possibly future enemy states are in question. Forgive them that do you wrong is doubtless one of those many platitudes which are uttered only to be ignored. It is too much to expect that men should do the right. They at least should know it, even if for reasons of state or otherwise they refuse to conform. The *clerics* of all nations have not so good a past to look back upon; yet today their assistance seems more necessary than ever. Many, however, will say that they never have been found more lacking.

T. F. D. WILLIAMS

## RATIONALISM IN POLITICS

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

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Les grands hommes, en apprenant aux faibles à réfléchir, les ont mis sur la route de l'erreur — VAUVENARGUES: *Maxims et Réflexions*, 221

## 1

THE object of this essay is to consider the character and pedigree of the most remarkable intellectual fashion of post-Renaissance Europe. The Rationalism with which I am concerned is modern Rationalism. No doubt its surface reflects the lights of rationalisms of a more distant past, but in its depth there is a quality exclusively its own, and it is this quality that I propose to consider, and to consider mainly in its impact upon European politics. What I call Rationalism in politics is not, of course, the only (and it is certainly not the most fruitful) fashion in modern European political thinking. But it is a strong and a lively manner of thinking which, finding support in its filiation with so much else that is strong in the intellectual composition of contemporary Europe, has come to colour the ideas, not merely of one, but of all political persuasions, and to flow over every party line. By one road or another, by conviction, by its supposed inevitability, or even quite unreflectively, almost all politics today have become Rationalist or near-Rationalist.

The general character and cast of mind of the Rationalist are, I think, not difficult to identify. At bottom he stands for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of reason. His circumstances in the modern world have made him contentious: he is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual. His mental attitude is at once sceptical and optimistic: sceptical, because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his reason; optimistic, because the Rationalist never doubts the power of his reason (when properly applied) to determine the value of a thing or the truth of an opinion. Moreover, he is fortified by a belief in a reason common to mankind, a common power of rational consideration, which is the ground and inspiration of argument: set up on his door is the precept of Parmenides, κρίναι λόγῳ — judge by rational argument. But besides this, which gives the Rationalist a touch of intellectual equalitarianism, he is something also of an individualist, finding it difficult to believe that anyone who can think honestly and clearly will think differently from himself.

But it is an error to attribute to him an excessive concern with *a priori* argument. He does not neglect experience, but he often appears to do so because he insists always upon a personal investigation (wanting to begin everything *de novo*), and because of the rapidity with which he reduces the tangle and variety of experience to a set of principles which he will then defend only upon rational grounds. He has no sense of the cumulation of experience, only of the readiness of experience when it has been converted into a formula: the past is significant to him only as an encumbrance. He has none of that *negative capability* (which Keats attributed to Shakespeare), the power of accepting the mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness, only the capability of subjugating experience. There are some minds which give us the sense that they have passed through an elaborate education which was designed to initiate them into the traditions and achievements of their civilisation; the immediate impression we have of them is an impression of cultivation, of the enjoyment of an inheritance. But this is not so with the mind of the Rationalist, which impresses us as, at best, a finely-tempered, neutral instrument, as a well-trained rather than as an educated mind. Intellectually, his ambition is not so much to share the experience of the race as to be demonstrably a self-made man. And this gives to his intellectual and practical activities an almost preternatural deliberateness and self-consciousness, depriving them of any element of passivity, removing from them all sense of rhythm and continuity and dissolving them into a succession of climacterics, each to be surmounted by a *tour de raison*. His mind has no atmosphere, no changes of season and temperature; his intellectual processes, so far as possible, are insulated from all external influence and go on in the void. And having cut himself off from the traditional knowledge of his society, and denied the value of any education more extensive than a training in a technique, he is apt to attribute to mankind a necessary inexperience in all the climacterics of life, and if he were more self-critical he might begin to wonder how the race had ever succeeded in surviving.<sup>1</sup> With an almost poetic fancy, he strives to live each day as if it were his first, and he believes that to form a habit is to fail. And if, with as yet no thought of analysis, we glance below the surface, we may, perhaps, see in the temperament, if not in the character, of the Rationalist, a deep distrust of time, an impatient hunger for eternity and an irritable nervousness in the face of everything topical and transitory.

Now, of all worlds, the world of politics might seem the least

<sup>1</sup> A typical rationalist figure is that of Samuel Butler when he said that Life was like playing a violin in the Albert Hall and learning the instrument as you went along.

amenable to rationalist treatment — politics, always so deeply veined with both the traditional and the transitory. And indeed, some convinced Rationalists have admitted defeat here: Clemenceau, intellectually a child of the modern Rationalist tradition, was anything but a Rationalist in politics. But not all have admitted defeat. If we except religion, the greatest apparent victories of Rationalism have been in politics: it is not to be expected that whoever is prepared to carry his rationalism into the conduct of life will hesitate to carry it into the conduct of affairs.

But what is important to observe in such a man (for it is characteristic) is not the decisions and actions he is inspired to make, but the source of his inspiration, his idea (and with him it will be a deliberate and conscious idea) of political activity. He believes, of course, in the open mind, the mind free from prejudice and its relic, habit. He believes that the unhindered human reason is an infallible guide in political activity. Further, he believes in argument as the technique and operation of reason; the truth of an opinion and the value of an institution is all that matters to him, and it can be demonstrated by rational argument alone. Consequently, much of his political activity consists in bringing the social, political, legal and institutional inheritance of his society before the tribunal of his intellect; and the rest is rational administration, reason exercising an uncontrolled jurisdiction over the circumstances of the case. To the Rationalist, nothing is of value merely because it exists (and certainly not because it has existed for many generations), and nothing is to be left standing for want of scrutiny. And his disposition of mind makes both destruction and creation easier for him to understand and engage in, than reform. He does not recognise change unless it is a self-consciously induced change, and consequently he falls easily into the error of identifying the customary and the traditional with the changeless. This is aptly illustrated by the rationalist attitude towards a tradition of ideas. There is, of course, no question either of retaining or improving such a tradition, for both these involve an attitude of submission. It must be destroyed. And to fill its place the Rationalist puts something of his own making — an ideology, the formalised abridgement of the supposed substratum of rational truth contained in the tradition.

The conduct of affairs, for the Rationalist, is a matter of solving problems, and in this no man can hope to be successful whose reason has become inflexible by surrender to habit or is clouded by the fumes of tradition. In this activity the character which the Rationalist claims for himself is the character of the engineer, whose mind (it is supposed) is controlled throughout by the appropriate technique and whose first step is to dismiss from his attention everything not directly related to the problem before him. This assimilation of

politics to engineering is, indeed, what may be called the myth of rationalist politics. And it is, of course, a recurring theme in the literature of Rationalism. The politics it inspires may be called the politics of the felt need; for the Rationalist, politics are always charged with the feeling of the moment. He waits upon circumstance to provide him with his problems, but rejects its aid in their solution. That anything should be allowed to stand between a society and the satisfaction of the felt needs of each moment in its history must appear to the Rationalist a piece of mysticism and nonsense. And his politics are, in fact, the rational solution of those practical conundrums which the recognition of the sovereignty of the felt need perpetually creates in the life of a society. Thus, political life is resolved into a succession of crises, each to be surmounted by the application of reason. Each generation, indeed, each administration, should see unrolled before it the blank sheet of infinite possibility. And if by chance this *tabula rasa* has been defaced by the irrational scribbles of tradition-ridden ancestors, then the first task of the Rationalist must be to scrub it clean; as Voltaire remarked, the only way to have good laws is to burn all existing laws and to start afresh.<sup>1</sup>

Two other general characteristics of rationalist politics may be observed. They are the politics of perfection, and they are the politics of uniformity; both these belong to its essence. The evanescence of imperfection may be said to be the first item of the creed of the Rationalist. He is not devoid of humility; he can imagine a problem which would remain impervious to the onslaught of his own reason. But what he cannot imagine is politics which do not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no rational solution at all. Such a problem must be counterfeit. And the rational solution of any problem is, in its nature, the perfect solution. There is no place in his scheme for a 'best in the circumstances', only a place for 'the best'; because the function of reason is precisely to surmount circumstances. Of course, the Rationalist is not always a perfectionist in general, his mind governed in each occasion by a comprehensive Utopia; but invariably he is a perfectionist in detail. And from the politics of perfection springs the politics of uniformity; a scheme which does not recognise circumstance can have no place for variety. 'There must in the nature of things be one best form of government which all intellects, sufficiently roused from the slumber of savage ignorance, will be irresistibly incited to approve', writes Godwin. This intrepid Rationalist states in general what a more modest believer might prefer to assert only in detail; but the principle holds — there may not be one universal remedy for all political ills, but the remedy for

<sup>1</sup> Cp. PLATO, *Republic* 501A. The idea that you can get rid of a law by burning it is characteristic of Rationalism.

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any particular ill is as universal in its application as it is rational in its conception. If the rational solution for one of the problems of a society has been determined, to permit any relevant part of the society to escape from the solution is, *ex hypothesi*, to countenance irrationality. There can be no place for preference that is not rational preference, and all rational preferences necessarily coincide.

The modern history of Europe is littered with the projects of the politics of Rationalism. The most sublime of these is, perhaps, that of Robert Owen for 'a world convention to emancipate the human race from ignorance, poverty, division, sin and misery' — so sublime that even a Rationalist (but without much justification) might think it eccentric. But not less characteristic are the diligent search of the present generation for an innocuous power which may safely be made so great as to be able to control all other powers in the human world, and the common disposition to believe that political machinery can take the place of moral and political education. The notion of founding a society, whether of individuals or of States, upon a Declaration of the Rights of Man is a creature of the rationalist brain, so also are national or racial self-determination when elevated into universal principles. The project of the so-called Re-union of the Christian Churches, of open diplomacy, of a single tax, of a civil service whose members 'have no qualifications other than their personal abilities', of a self-consciously planned society, the Beveridge Report, the Education Act of 1944, Federalism, Votes for Women, the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the World State (of H. G. Wells or anyone else), and the revival of Gaelic as the official language of Eire, are alike the progeny of Rationalism.

## 2

The placid lake of Rationalism lies before us in the character and disposition of the Rationalist, its surface familiar and not unconvincing, its waters fed by many visible tributaries. But in its depths there flows a hidden spring, which must be considered not only the original fountain from which the lake grew, but also the pre-eminent source of its endurance. This spring is a doctrine about human knowledge. That some such fountain lies at the heart of Rationalism will not surprise even those who know only its surface; the superiority of the unencumbered intellect lay precisely in the fact that it could reach more, and more certain, knowledge about man and society than was otherwise possible; the superiority of the ideology over the tradition lay in its greater precision and demonstrability. Nevertheless, it is not, properly speaking, a philosophical theory of knowledge, and it can be explained with agreeable informality.

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any sort, indeed every human activity whatsoever, involves knowledge. And, universally, this knowledge is of two sorts, both of which are always involved in any actual activity. It is not, I think, making too much of it to call them two sorts of knowledge, because (though in fact they do not exist separately) there are certain important differences between them. The first sort of knowledge I will call technical knowledge or knowledge of technique. In every art and science, and in every practical activity, a technique is involved. In many activities this technical knowledge is formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice; but whether or not it is, or has been, precisely formulated, its chief characteristic is that it is susceptible of precise formulation, although special skill and insight may be required to give it that formulation.<sup>1</sup> The technique (or part of it) of driving a motor car on English roads is to be found in the Highway Code, the technique of cookery is contained in the cookery book, and the technique of discovery in natural science or in history is in their rules of research, of observation and verification, collected together in heuristic. The second sort of knowledge I will call practical, because it exists only in practice, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules. This does not mean, however, that it is an esoteric sort of knowledge. It means only that the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine. And if we consider it from this point of view, it would not, I think, be misleading to speak of it as traditional knowledge. In every activity of man this sort of knowledge is also involved; the mastery of any skill, the pursuit of any concrete activity is impossible without it.

These two sorts of knowledge, then, distinguishable but inseparable, are the twin components of the knowledge involved in every concrete human activity. In a practical art, such as cookery, nobody supposes that the knowledge that belongs to the good cook is confined to what is or may be written down in the cookery book; technique and what I have called practical knowledge combine to make skill in cookery wherever it exists. And the same is true of the fine arts, of painting, of music, of poetry; a high degree of technical knowledge, even where it is both subtle and ready, is one thing; the ability to create a work of art, the ability to compose something with real musical qualities, the ability to write a great sonnet, is another, and requires, in addition to technique, this other sort of knowledge. Again, these two sorts of knowledge are involved in any genuinely scientific activity.<sup>2</sup> The natural scientist will

<sup>1</sup> G. POLYA, *How to Solve it*.

<sup>2</sup> Some excellent observations on this topic are to be found in M. POLANYI, *Science, Faith and Society*.

certainly make use of the rules of observation and verification that belong to his technique, but these rules remain only one of the components of his knowledge; advance in scientific discovery was never achieved merely by following the rules.<sup>1</sup> The same situation may be observed also in religion. It would, I think, be excessively liberal to call a man a Christian who was wholly ignorant of the technical side of Christianity, who knew nothing of creed or formula, but it would be even more absurd to maintain that even the readiest knowledge of creed and catechism ever constituted the whole of the knowledge that belongs to a Christian. And what is true of cookery, of painting, of natural science and of religion, is no less true of politics: the knowledge involved in political activity is both technical and practical.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as in all arts which have men as their plastic material, arts such as medicine, industrial management, diplomacy, and the art of military command, the knowledge involved in political activity is pre-eminently of this dual character. Nor, in these arts, is it correct to say that whereas technique will tell a man (for example, a doctor) *what* to do, it is practice which tells him *how* to do it — the 'bed-side manner', the appreciation of the individual with whom he has to deal. Even in the *what*, and above all in diagnosis, there lies already this dualism of technique and practice. Nor, again, does the distinction between technical and practical knowledge coincide with the distinction between a knowledge of means and a knowledge of ends, though on occasion it may appear to do so. In short, nowhere, and pre-eminently not in political activity, can technical knowledge be separated from practical knowledge, and nowhere can they be considered identical with one another or able to take the place of one another.

Now, what concerns us are the differences between these two sorts of knowledge; and the important differences are those which manifest themselves in the divergent ways in which these sorts of knowledge can be expressed, and in the divergent ways in which they can be learned or acquired.

Technical knowledge, we have seen, is susceptible of formulation in rules, principles, directions, maxims — comprehensively, in propositions. It is possible to write down technical knowledge in a book. Consequently, it does not surprise us that when an artist writes about

<sup>1</sup> Polya, for example, in spite of the fact that his book is concerned with heuristic, suggests that the root conditions of success in scientific research, are, first, 'to have brains and good luck', and secondly, 'to sit tight and wait till you get a bright idea', neither of which are technical rules.

<sup>2</sup> Thucydides puts an appreciation of this truth into the mouth of Pericles. To be a politician and to refuse the guidance of technical knowledge is, for Pericles, a piece of folly. And yet the main theme of the Funeral Oration is not the value of technique (intelligence) in politics, but the value of practical and traditional knowledge. ii, 40.

his art, he writes only about the technique of his art. This is so, not because he is ignorant of what may be called the aesthetic element, or thinks it unimportant, but because what he has to say about *that* he has said already (if he is a painter) in his pictures, and he knows no other way of saying it. And the same is true when a religious man writes about his religion<sup>1</sup> or a cook about cookery. And it may be observed that this character of being susceptible of precise formulation gives to technical knowledge at least the appearance of certainty: it appears to be possible to be certain about a technique. On the other hand, it is an essential characteristic of practical knowledge that it is not susceptible of formulation of this kind. Its normal expression is in a customary or traditional way of doing things, or, simply, in practice. And this gives it the appearance of imprecision and consequently of uncertainty, of being a matter of opinion, of probability rather than truth. It is, indeed, a knowledge of *nuance*, a knowledge that is expressed in taste, lacking rigidity and ready for the impress of the mind of the learner.

Technical knowledge can be learned from a book; it can be learned in a correspondence course. Moreover, much of it can be learned by heart, repeated by rote, and applied mechanically: the logic of the syllogism is a technique of this kind. Technical knowledge, in short, can be both taught and learned in the simplest meanings of these words. On the other hand, practical knowledge can neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice, and the only way to acquire it is by apprenticeship to a master — not because the master can teach it (he cannot), but because it can be acquired only by continuous contact with one who is perpetually practising it. In the arts and in natural science what normally happens is that the pupil, in being taught and in learning the technique from his master, discovers himself to have acquired also another sort of knowledge than merely technical knowledge, without it ever having been precisely imparted and without being able to say precisely what it is. Thus a pianist acquires artistry as well as technique, a chess-player style and insight into the game as well as a knowledge of the rules, and a scientist (among other things) the sort of judgment which tells him when his technique is leading him astray.

It may appear that I have been over long in reaching a conclusion, but this somewhat elaborate preparation enables me to divulge, without more ado, the root of Rationalism. Rationalism is the assertion that what I have called practical knowledge is not knowledge at all, the assertion that, properly speaking, there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge. The Rationalist holds that

<sup>1</sup> St. François de Sales was a devout man, but when he writes it is about the technique of piety.

the only element of *knowledge* involved in any human activity is technical knowledge, and that what I have called practical knowledge is really only a sort of nescience which would be negligible if it were not positively mischievous. The sovereignty of reason, for the Rationalist, means the sovereignty of technique.

The heart of the matter is the pre-occupation of the Rationalist with certainty. Technique and certainty are, for him, inseparably joined because certain knowledge is, for him, knowledge which does not require to look beyond itself for its certainty; knowledge, that is, which not only ends with certainty but begins with certainty and is certain throughout. And this is precisely what technical knowledge appears to be. It seems to be a self-complete sort of knowledge because it seems to range between an identifiable initial point (where it breaks in upon sheer ignorance) and an identifiable terminal point, where it is complete, as in learning the rules of a game. It has the aspect of knowledge that can be contained wholly between the two covers of a book, whose application is, as nearly as possible, purely mechanical, and which does not assume an intelligence not itself provided in the technique. For example, the superiority of an ideology over a tradition of ideas lies in its appearance of being self-contained. It can be taught best to those whose minds are empty; and if it is to be taught to one who already believes something, the first step of the teacher must be to administer a purge, to make certain that all prejudices and preconceptions are removed, to lay his foundation upon the unshakable rock of absolute ignorance. In short, technical knowledge appears to be the only kind of knowledge which satisfies the standard of certainty which the Rationalist has chosen.

Now, I have suggested that the knowledge involved in every concrete activity is never solely technical knowledge. If this is true, it would appear that the error of the Rationalist is of a simple sort — the error of mistaking a part for the whole, of endowing a part with the qualities of the whole. The Rationalist is like a shopkeeper who, having bought an estate, thinks that a correspondence course in estate management will give him all the knowledge necessary to control it and its tenantry, and that the knowledge which belongs to a man who has been educated from his earliest years in the responsibilities and duties of a landowner is not (where it goes beyond the technique) knowledge at all, but nescience. But the error of the Rationalist does not stop there. If the great illusion of the Rationalist is the sovereignty of technique, he is no less deceived by the apparent certainty of technical knowledge. The superiority of technical knowledge lay in its appearance of springing from pure ignorance and ending in pure knowledge, its appearance of both beginning and ending with certainty. But, in fact, this is an illusion.

As with every other sort of knowledge, learning a technique does not consist in getting rid of pure ignorance, but in reforming knowledge which is already there. Nothing, not even the most nearly self-contained technique (the rules of a game) can in fact be imparted to an empty mind; and what is imparted is nourished by what is already there. Just as the self-made man is never literally *self-made*, but depends upon a certain form of society and upon a large unrecognised inheritance, so technical knowledge is never in fact self-complete, and can be made to appear so only if we forget the hypotheses with which it begins. And if its self-completeness is illusory, the certainty which was attributed to it on account of its self-completeness, is also an illusion.

But my object is not to refute Rationalism; its errors are interesting only in so far as they reveal its character. We are considering not merely the truth of a doctrine, but the significance of an intellectual fashion in the history of post-Renaissance Europe. And the questions we must try to answer are: What is the generation of this belief in the sovereignty of technique? Whence springs this supreme confidence in human reason? What is the provenance, the context of this intellectual character? And in what circumstances and with what effect did it come to invade European politics?

## 3

The appearance of a new intellectual character is like the appearance of a new architectural style; it emerges almost imperceptibly, under the pressure of a great variety of influences, and it is a misdirection of inquiry to seek its origins. Indeed, there are no origins; all that can be discerned are the slowly mediated changes, the shuffling and reshuffling, the flow and ebb of the tides of inspiration, which issue finally in a shape identifiably new. The ambition of the historian is to escape that gross abridgement of the process which gives the new shape a too early or too late and a too precise definition, and to avoid the false emphasis which springs from being over-impressed by the moment of emergence. Yet that moment must have a dominating interest for those whose ambitions are not pitched so high. And I propose to foreshorten my account of the emergence of modern Rationalism, the intellectual character and disposition of the Rationalist, by beginning it at the moment when it first shows itself unmistakably, and by considering only one element in the context of its emergence. This moment is the early seventeenth century, and it was connected, *inter alia*, with the condition of knowledge — knowledge of both the natural and the civilised world — at that time.

The state of European knowledge at the beginning of the seventeenth century was peculiar. Remarkable advances had already

been achieved, the tide of inquiry flowed as strongly as at any other period in our history, and the fruitfulness of the presuppositions which inspired this inquiry showed no sign of exhaustion. And yet to intelligent observers it appeared that something of supreme importance was lacking. 'The state of knowledge', wrote Bacon, 'is not prosperous nor greatly advancing.'<sup>1</sup> And this want of prosperity was not attributable to the survival of a disposition of mind inimical to the sort of inquiry that was on foot; it was observed as a hindrance suffered by minds already fully emancipated from the presuppositions (though not, of course, from some of the details) of Aristotelian science. What appeared to be lacking was not inspiration or even methodical habits of inquiry, but a consciously formulated technique of research, an art of interpretation, a method whose rules had been written down. And the project of making good this want was the occasion of the unmistakable emergence of the new intellectual character I have called the Rationalist. The dominating figures in the early history of this project are, of course, Bacon and Descartes, and we may find in their writings intimations of what later became the Rationalist character.

Bacon's ambition is to equip the intellect with what appeared to him necessary if certain and demonstrable knowledge of the world in which we live is to be attained. Such knowledge is not possible for the 'natural reason', which is capable of only 'petty and probable conjectures', not of certainty.<sup>2</sup> And this imperfection is reflected in the want of prosperity of the state of knowledge. The *Novum Organum* begins with a diagnosis of the intellectual situation. What is lacking is a clear perception of the nature of certainty and an adequate means of achieving it. 'There remains', says Bacon, 'but one course for the recovery of a sound and healthy condition — namely, that the entire work of understanding be commenced afresh, and the mind itself be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step.'<sup>3</sup> What is required is a 'sure plan', a new 'way' of understanding, an 'art' or 'method' of inquiry, an 'instrument' which (like the mechanical aids men use to increase the effectiveness of their natural strength) shall supplement the weakness of the natural reason: in short, what is required is a consciously formulated technique of research.<sup>4</sup> He recognises that this technique will appear as a kind of hindrance to the natural reason, not supplying it with wings but hanging weights upon it in order to control its exuberance;<sup>5</sup> but it will be a hindrance of hindrances to certainty, because it is lack of discipline which stands between the natural reason and certain knowledge of the world. And Bacon compares this technique of research with the technique of the syllogism, the

<sup>1</sup> BACON, *Novum Organum* (Fowler), p. 157.    <sup>2</sup> p. 184.    <sup>3</sup> p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> p. 157.    <sup>5</sup> p. 295.

one being appropriate to the discovery of the truth of things while the other is appropriate only to the discovery of the truth of opinions.<sup>1</sup>

The art of research which Bacon recommends has three main characteristics. First, it is a set of rules; it is a true technique in that it can be formulated as a precise set of directions which can be learned by heart.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, it is a set of rules whose application is purely mechanical; it is a true technique because it does not require for its use any intelligence not given in the technique itself. Bacon is explicit on this point. The business of interpreting nature is 'to be done as if by machinery',<sup>3</sup> 'the strength and excellence of the wit [of the inquirer] has little to do with the matter',<sup>4</sup> the new method 'places all wits and understandings nearly on a level'.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, it is a set of rules of universal application; it is a true technique in that it is an instrument of inquiry indifferent to the subject-matter of the inquiry.

Now, what is significant in this project is not the precise character of the rules of inquiry, both positive and negative, but the notion that a technique of this sort is even possible. For what is proposed — infallible rules of discovery — is something very remarkable, a sort of philosopher's stone, a key to open all doors. Bacon is humble enough about the details of his method, he does not think he has given it a final formulation; but his belief in the possibility of such a method in general is unbounded.<sup>6</sup> From our point of view, the first of his rules is the most important, the precept that we must lay aside received opinion, that we must 'begin anew from the very foundations'.<sup>7</sup> Genuine knowledge must begin with a purge of the mind, because it must begin as well as end in certainty and must be complete in itself. Knowledge and opinion are separated absolutely; there is no question of ever winning true knowledge out of 'the childish notions we at first imbibed'. And this, it may be remarked, is what distinguishes both Platonic and Scholastic from modern Rationalism: Plato is a rationalist, but the dialectic is not a technique, and the method of Scholasticism always had before it a limited aim.

The doctrine of the *Novum Organum* may be summed up, from our point of view, as the sovereignty of technique. It represents, not merely a preoccupation with technique combined with a recognition that technical knowledge is never the whole of knowledge, but the assertion that technique and some material for it to work upon are all that matters. Nevertheless, this is not itself the beginning of the new intellectual fashion, it is only an early and unmistakable intimation of it: the fashion itself may be said to have sprung from

<sup>1</sup> BACON, *Novum Organum* (Fowler), p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> p. 233.

<sup>6</sup> p. 331.

<sup>7</sup> p. 295.

the exaggeration of Bacon's hopes rather than from the character of his beliefs.

Descartes, like Bacon, derived inspiration from what appeared to be the defects of contemporary inquiry; he also perceived the lack of a consciously and precisely formulated technique of inquiry. And the method propounded in the *Discours de la Méthode* and the *Regulae* corresponds closely to that of the *Novum Organum*. For Descartes, no less than for Bacon, the aim is certainty. Certain knowledge can spring only from a personal investigation; the technique of research begins with an intellectual purge. The first principle of Descartes is 'de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle, c'est-à-dire d'éviter soigneusement la précipitation et la prévention', 'de bâtir dans un fonds qui est tout à moi'; and the inquirer is said to be 'comme un homme qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres'.<sup>1</sup> Further, the technique of inquiry is formulated in a set of rules which, ideally, compose an infallible method whose application is mechanical and universal. And thirdly, there are no grades in knowledge, what is not certain is mere nescience. Descartes, however, is distinguished from Bacon in respect of the thoroughness of his education in the Scholastic philosophy and in the profound impression that geometrical demonstration had upon his mind, and the effect of these differences in education and inspiration is to make his formulation of the technique of inquiry more precise and in consequence more critical. His mind is orientated towards the project of an infallible and universal method of research, but since the method he propounds is modelled on that of geometry, its limitations when applied, not to possibilities but to things, is easily apparent. Descartes is more thorough than Bacon in doing his scepticism for himself and, in the end, he recognises it to be an error to suppose that the method can ever be the sole means of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> The sovereignty of technique turns out to be a dream and not a reality. Nevertheless, the lesson his successors believed themselves to have learned from Descartes was the sovereignty of technique and not his doubtfulness about the possibility of an infallible method.

By a pardonable abridgement of history, the Rationalist character may be seen springing from the exaggeration of Bacon's hopes and the neglect of the scepticism of Descartes; modern Rationalism is what commonplace minds made out of the inspiration of men of discrimination and genius. *Les grands hommes, en apprenant aux faibles à réfléchir, les ont mis sur la route de l'erreur*. But the history of Rationalism is not only the history of the gradual emergence and definition of this new intellectual character; it is, also, the history of the invasion of every department of intellectual activity by the

<sup>1</sup> *Discours de la Méthode*, ii.      <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* vi.

doctrine of the sovereignty of technique. Descartes never became a Cartesian; but as Bouillier says of the seventeenth century, 'le cartésianisme a triomphé; il s'est emparé du grand siècle tout entier, il a pénétré de son esprit, non seulement la philosophie, mais les sciences et les lettres elles-mêmes'.<sup>1</sup> It is common knowledge that, at this time, in poetry and in drama, there was a remarkable concentration on technique, on rules of composition, on the observance of the *bienséances* of literature, which continued unabated for nearly two centuries. A stream of books flowed from the presses on the 'art of poetry', the 'art of living', the 'art of thinking'. Neither religion, nor natural science, nor education, nor the conduct of life itself escaped from the influence of the new Rationalism; no activity was immune, no society untouched.<sup>2</sup>

The slowly mediated changes by which the Rationalist of the seventeenth century became the Rationalist as we know him today, are a long and complicated story which I do not propose even to abridge. It is important only to observe that, with every step it has taken away from the true sources of its inspiration, the Rationalist character has become cruder and more vulgar. What in the seventeenth century was '*L'art de penser*' has now become *Your mind and how to use it, a plan by world-famous experts for developing a trained mind at a fraction of the usual cost*. What was the *Art of Living*, has become the *Technique of Success*, and the early and more modest incursions of the sovereignty of technique into education have blossomed into *Pelmanism*.

The deeper motivations which encouraged and developed this intellectual fashion are, not unnaturally, obscure; they are hidden in the recesses of European society. But among its other connections, it is certainly closely allied with a decline in the belief in Providence: a beneficent and infallible technique replaced a beneficent and infallible God; and where Providence was not available to correct the mistakes of man it was all the more necessary to prevent such mistakes. Certainly, also, its provenance is a society or a

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de la philosophie cartésienne*, i. 486.

<sup>2</sup> One important aspect of the history of the emergence of Rationalism is the changing connotation of the word 'reason'. The 'reason' to which the Rationalist appeals is not, for example, the Reason of Hooker, which belongs still to the tradition of Stoicism and of Aquinas. It is a faculty of calculation by which men conclude one thing from another and discover fit means of attaining given ends not themselves subject to the criticism of reason, a faculty by which a world believed to be a machine could be made intelligible. Much of the plausibility of Rationalism lies in the tacit attribution to the new 'reason' of the qualities which belong properly to the Reason of the older intellectual tradition. And this ambiguity, the emergence of the new connotation out of the old, may be observed in many of the writers of the early seventeenth century — in, for example, the poetry of Malherbe, an older contemporary of Descartes, and one of the great progenitors of the sovereignty of technique in literature.

generation which thinks what it has discovered for itself is more important than what it has inherited,<sup>1</sup> an age over-impressed with its own accomplishment and liable to those illusions of intellectual grandeur which are the characteristic lunacy of post-Renaissance Europe, an age never mentally at peace with itself because never reconciled with its past. And the vision of a technique which puts all minds on the same level provided just that short cut which would attract men in a hurry to appear educated but incapable of appreciating the subtlety of their total inheritance. And, partly under the influence of Rationalism itself, the number of such men has been steadily growing since the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it may be said that all or almost all the influences which in its early days served to encourage the emergence of the Rationalist character, have subsequently become more influential in our civilisation.

Now, it is not to be thought that Rationalism established itself easily and without opposition. It was suspect as a novelty, and some fields of human activity — literature, for example — on which at first its hold was strong, subsequently freed themselves from its grasp. Indeed, at all levels and in all fields there have been continuous criticism of and resistance to the teachings of Rationalism. And the significance of the doctrine of the sovereignty of technique becomes clearer when we consider what one of its first and profoundest critics has to say about it. Pascal is a judicious critic of Descartes, not opposing him at all points, but opposing him nevertheless, on points that are fundamental.<sup>3</sup> He perceived, first, that the Cartesian desire for certain knowledge was based upon a false criterion of certainty. Descartes must begin with something so

<sup>1</sup> This was certainly true of the age of Bacon. And Professor Bernal now tells us that 'more has been found out at large and in detail about nature and man in the past thirty years (i.e. since 1915) than in the whole of history'. *The Listener*, February 1st, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Not so very long ago, I suppose, the spectators at horse-races were mostly men and women who knew something at first-hand about horses, and who (in this respect) were genuinely educated people. This has ceased to be so, except perhaps in Ireland. And the ignorant spectator, with no ability, inclination or opportunity to educate himself, and seeking a short cut out of his predicament, demands a book. (The twentieth-century vogue in cookery books derives, no doubt, from a similar situation.) The authors of one such book, *A Guide to the Classics, or how to pick the Derby winner*, aware of the difference between technical and complete knowledge, were at pains to point out that there was a limit beyond which there were no precise rules for picking the winner, and that some intelligence (not supplied by the rules themselves) was necessary. But some of its greedy, rationalistic readers, on the look-out for an infallible method, which (like Bacon's) would place their small wits on a level with men of genuine education, thought they had been sold a pup — which only goes to show how much better they would have spent their time if they had read Plato or Hegel instead of Descartes: *je ne puis pardonner à Descartes*.

<sup>3</sup> *Pensées* (Brunschvicg), 1, 76.

sure that it cannot be doubted, and was led, as a consequence, to believe that all genuine knowledge is technical knowledge. Pascal avoided this conclusion by his doctrine of probability: the only knowledge that is certain is certain on account of its partiality; the paradox that probable knowledge has more of the whole truth than certain knowledge. Secondly, Pascal perceived that the Cartesian *raisonnement* is never in fact the whole source of the knowledge involved in any concrete activity. The human mind, he asserts, is not wholly dependent for its successful working upon a conscious and formulated technique; and even where a technique is involved, the mind observes the technique 'tacitement, naturellement et sans art'. The precise formulation of rules of inquiry endangers the success of the inquiry by exaggerating the importance of method. Pascal was followed by others, and indeed much of the history of modern philosophy revolves round this question. But, though later writers were often more elaborate in their criticism, few detected more surely than Pascal that the significance of Rationalism is not its recognition of technical knowledge, but its failure to recognise any other: its philosophical error lies in the certainty it attributes to technique and in its doctrine of the sovereignty of technique; its practical error lies in its belief that nothing but benefit can come from making inquiry self-conscious.

*To be continued in a later issue.*

## MALLET DU PAN: A SWISS CRITIC OF DEMOCRACY

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MALLET DU PAN was an occasional encounter due to the hazards of the war. One of the many sorrows that befell us on the Continent during those years was the deprivation of books. We had to be contented with what little we could manage to carry along, sometimes in a rucksack, or to find in odd and unexpected places. I came across Mallet du Pan in an old family library and took to him at once. His books stirred up in me a deep interest in certain happenings in which my forefathers had been involved, and of which the present seemed but the continuation. They offered the bitter comfort of a comparison between my own experience and the troubled times which they had witnessed. They provided a clue to many questions which I was anxiously putting myself in the days of Fascist and Nazi domination, when the old ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity seemed laden with all the charm of a lost paradise.

It is difficult for the English to understand what the French Revolution still means on the Continent. And yet it sounds almost a truism to say that many of the differences between us go back to the fact that the 'spirit of 1789' has remained alien to this country. It is a difference in social structure as well as in attitude of mind. Revolutionary ideals and achievements have left a lasting mark upon continental Europe. The epic grandeur of the French Revolution still looms large in our imagination. Rightly or wrongly, we feel with Goethe that it really opened 'eine neue Epoche der Weltgeschichte'. Rightly or wrongly, we think that many of our problems, many of our worries find their origin and explanation in that great upheaval. This applies to all our ways and modes of life. It applies, of course, still more to the field of politics. Such words as democracy and freedom undoubtedly convey a different meaning, sometimes even arouse different emotions, to the British as opposed to French or Italian ears. For one thing, they seem to us to express far less unquestionable entities and truths. A century of constitutional strife in France, the decay of parliamentary life in Italy, the inglorious end of the model constitution of Weimar, the Spanish Civil War: surely these are sufficient grounds for asking what is wrong with Continental democracy.

It was the question which we were anxiously putting to ourselves

in the great catastrophe that had befallen us. But it was by no means a new question. Such writers as Madame de Staël, Benjamin Constant and Tocqueville, who had witnessed the advent of authoritarian rule with the first and the second Napoleon, had put it in very similar terms. They had tried to find the reasons for the collapse of democratic institutions under a dictatorship, and to explain why democracy had been unable to take root in France as it had in the English-speaking world. Their writings, which provided an admirable plea for freedom against despotism, were reprinted and largely circulated in the teeth of Fascist censorship. They led us back to the problem of our revolutionary inheritance, to the great issues of 1789.

Now Mallet du Pan appeared to me to fit in admirably into the atmosphere which I have tried to describe. I thought that I had made a great, an important discovery, and I felt sure that I would succeed in interesting my friends in him, as he had fascinated me. Here was a contemporary who had tried to understand rather than to condemn or extol the great Revolution. Here was a man who gave evidence of the greatness and perils of continental democracy; a man deeply imbued with the ideal of liberty, and for that very reason deeply concerned with its fate. It made excellent reading because it read very much like the present: a tale of great expectations and bitter disillusionment, of terror and persecution, of propaganda and fifth columns: with Europe paralysed and Britain undaunted. But I think that Mallet du Pan has a lesson even for the present day.

Mallet du Pan was born at Céligny, on the shores of the lake of Geneva, towards the middle of the eighteenth century. He belonged to an old Huguenot family; his father was a Calvinist minister. A protégé of Voltaire, he became a professional journalist, and was, from 1783 to 1792, the editor of the political section of the *Mercure de France*. Having incurred the wrath of the revolutionary government, he fled first to Switzerland and then to England, where he died in dire poverty in 1800. His main literary activity is condensed in the columns of the *Mercure de France*, which was perhaps the most widely read of French papers, and is considered one of the richest sources of information on the revolutionary period. But he has left also some very valuable, though less remembered, theoretical writings, such as the *Considérations sur la nature de la Révolution française et sur les causes qui en prolongent la durée* (1793, English translation of the same year), and an unfinished *Essai sur le Républicanisme Français* (1796). His wide correspondence with the Cabinets of Vienna, Berlin and Lisbon has only in part been published. During the last two years of his life he edited in England, in a French as well as in an English edition, a fortnightly paper, the *Mercure Britannique*, an original combination of topical news with political speculation.

I have no intention of giving a complete appreciation of the several writings of Mallet du Pan, nor do I feel competent to go into the question, which is much discussed among historians, of the accuracy of his information about the great events which he described. These questions are discussed at length in the exhaustive biography written by an English descendant of Mallet du Pan and published at the beginning of this century (*Mallet du Pan and the French Revolution*, by Bernard Mallet, London, 1902). The value of Mallet du Pan as a foreign witness of the Revolution was highly praised by Taine and by Lord Acton. It has been seriously questioned by more recent historians, who have gone so far as to say that it is high time that Mallet du Pan should be dislodged from the pinnacle to which he has been exalted.

But as a political thinker, I do not know that Mallet du Pan has as yet received the consideration which he undoubtedly deserves. Apart from two admirable essays of Sainte-Beuve in the *Causeries du Lundi*, his political views have never been properly studied nor described.<sup>1</sup> I think that it is not enough to relate them, as they undoubtedly must be related, to those of his two great contemporaries, Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre, from which they differ very widely. They must also be evaluated in relation to the whole development of nineteenth-century political thought, which he may well be said to anticipate in many ways.

I shall begin by stressing a few points which I consider more important for the understanding of Mallet du Pan's personality. Mallet du Pan was a Swiss and a Protestant. He professed himself a follower of Adam Smith and of Montesquieu. He was, like many of his contemporaries, a great admirer of the English constitution; but he was also a shrewd critic of its defects and imperfections, and he was convinced that to transplant the English system to France was as absurd 'as to try and grow sugar-cane in Siberia'. Above all he remained all his life a proud citizen of Geneva. 'I would be ready to give my life', he wrote in 1791, 'for the maintenance of that republican government which has formed my youth, my tastes, my mind and my character.' This makes his attitude to the French Revolution the more remarkable. It certainly deeply impressed his contemporaries. 'There was something moving', wrote an English admirer after his death, 'in the sight of a Protestant writer in France raising a protest against the persecution of the Catholic Church, of a republican fighting against the uprooting of monarchy, and undertaking the defence of the clergy and the

<sup>1</sup> Two helpful books deserve to be mentioned:

F. BALDENSPERGER, *Le mouvement des idées dans l'émigration*, Paris 1925;

M. MÖCKLI-CELLIER, *La révolution française et les écrivains suisses-romands*, Neuchâtel 1931.



nobility, unwearingly in setting the notion of true freedom and of the common good against the sophisms and the license of factions.' (*Mercure Britannique*, last French issue.)

This brings me to my second point, which I think is particularly important with regard to Burke and De Maistre. The attitude of Mallet du Pan was never a merely negative one, it was positive. From the beginning, he declared for accepting the Revolution as necessary and wholesome; he condemned the 'chimerical ideas of a Counter-revolution'. But also from the beginning he warned against the perils which the Revolution entailed, and raised his voice against its abuses. This is what he wrote in January 1791: 'Nobody has had more grounds to rejoice at the advent of liberty than he who has been nurtured in its school, and has all his life hated absolute government. But in order to love liberty, one must have experienced it; in order to discern it among the misnomers of ambition and theoretical illusions, one must have a clear grasp of its excesses as well as of its benefits; in order to know its limits one must have learnt to realise the dangers to which a State is exposed when the barriers are cast down which had been raised by law, justice and wisdom between the power of the people and his obedience.'

Mallet du Pan was thus really much more concerned with the present than with the past. This is my third point, and a further difference from Burke and De Maistre. His real ambition was to understand and explain what was happening before his eyes, and he strove for a rational explanation, which could be set forth in human terms. He would have nothing to do with the mystical, almost messianic, visions of his great opposite number De Maistre. The finger of God and the cloven hoof of the devil were romantic expedients which had little appeal for a pupil of Voltaire. Political problems he considered as practical problems: and first and foremost was to him the problem of making the ideal of liberty practicable and of ensuring it against the forces which made for its destruction.

Such ideals and aims were not shared by many people in the frantic competition for power which the Revolution had let loose. As a foreigner and an impartial observer, Mallet du Pan always kept himself aloof from immediate implication in party struggle. But he did not conceal his sympathies for the small group of men who, in the early days of the Revolution, battled in vain for a moderate solution. Their best representatives were such men as Mounier, Lally-Tollendal and Malouet; they were all intimate friends of Mallet du Pan and remained devoted to him to the end. Their cause was, from the beginning, an unpopular one. They were bitterly opposed, during the summer months of that fateful 1789, by the extremists both of the Right and the Left. The decrees of September and the tumults of October marked their final defeat. Instead of a

constitutional monarchy, the Assembly decided to establish what Mallet du Pan scornfully called a 'royal democracy'. The shrewd observer saw its perils at once. 'In no country', he wrote in the *Mercure* of September 26th, 'can freedom be stable without sacrificing its excesses, without a barrier to its omnipotence. Under this miserable government the people will soon be tired of the storm, and will be abandoned without any legal defence to his seducers or his oppressors. He will then abandon the wheel or hand it over willingly to any man daring enough to seize it.'

Mallet du Pan's criticism of democracy thus dates back to what a modern Italian historian has called the short-lived epiphany of freedom in 1789.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of his meditations was henceforward to centre around one main theme: why was freedom, no sooner conquered, endangered and lost. To that question Mallet du Pan seemed to have several answers.

The first was essentially inspired by practical and almost technical considerations. The initial error of the Revolution, according to Mallet du Pan, lay in allowing the seizure of unlimited sovereignty by one single assembly, without any of those checks and balances which were represented in England by a second Chamber and a strong monarchy. Sainte-Beuve, writing in the hey-days of bourgeois liberalism, expressed the view that Mallet du Pan would have found in the Monarchy of July 'the final realisation of all that he had wished for and of which he had so often despaired'. There may be some truth in this statement; but it does not pay full regard to the fact that Mallet du Pan never really committed himself to the defence of any particular constitutional system. 'It matters little', he wrote, 'whether to ensure the welfare of France two, three, or a hundred Chambers should be deemed necessary'; he went so far indeed as to conclude his *Considérations* with a quotation from Pope:

For forms of government let fools contest;  
Whate'er is best administer'd is best.

The real problem with which Mallet du Pan was concerned was another one. It was a problem of political standards, and hence of political education. One of the few sentences of his which are still remembered and quoted by historians is the famous one, that France needed thirty years of preliminary training before it would be fit to support political liberty. This did not only imply a pessimistic judgment of the political maturity of the French and the Latins. It indicated a definite view of the conditions which made freedom and democracy possible. The ideal which he had in mind was inspired by his Swiss upbringing and nostalgia. He contrasted, in a pathetic *Essay upon the destruction of the Helvetic League and liberty*, the

<sup>1</sup> A. OMODEO, *La cultura francese nell'età della Restaurazione*, Milano 1946.

dogmas of the Revolution with the 'civil government' of his native country. His defence of an age-long tradition of liberty and self-government might have been reminiscent of Burke, save for a fresh Alpine breeze which added to its charm.

Now in the case of France no such tradition existed. Long before Tocqueville Mallet du Pan maintained that liberal institutions could not be grafted all at once 'sur un corps servile'. In an admirable passage of his unfinished *Essai sur le Republicanisme Français* he seemed indeed to foresee the terms upon which French history and thought would endlessly revolve in the following century. A country like France, he pointed out, was bound to labour for years under the conflicting influence of its twofold heritage: that of extreme authoritarianism and that of extreme democracy. Only political genius would be able to achieve that 'fragile, mais désirable alliance de l'autorité monarchique et de la liberté, contre laquelle lutteront sans cesse les souvenirs, soit de la toute-puissance royale, soit de l'indépendance révolutionnaire, et qui ne fixera en France une constitution quelconque, que lorsque le tems, législateur suprême, aura amalgamé ces éléments hétérogènes.'

But the lack of a real tradition of liberty was not the only explanation of its premature loss. Another explanation was to be found, according to Mallet du Pan, in the very notion of democracy which the Revolution had popularised and set out to establish. No doubt Mallet du Pan is not the only nor the foremost among the critics of democratic government; but he is the first to state the case from a liberal rather than from a reactionary point of view. In this, as in many other aspects of his thought, he strikingly anticipates Tocqueville. Like Tocqueville, he saw in the struggle between the ideal of liberty and the passion for equality one of the most dramatic factors of the French Revolution. Like Tocqueville, he maintained that the Revolution failed to reconcile democracy and freedom: 'le système de l'égalité chassa celui de la liberté.' (*Essai*.)

It was a well circumstantiated indictment, based upon a vivid experience of the dangers it denounced. Mallet du Pan could provide direct evidence of the manner in which the freedom of the press, which had been solemnly proclaimed as one of the fundamental rights of the citizen, was continually endangered under the new regime. His work as a journalist was from the beginning subjected to pressure and menace. A new despotism had been set up, no less arbitrary than the one which had been abolished. It was the despotism of the general will. A new crime had taken the place of the obsolete notion of heresy. Dissent could henceforward be crushed as 'counter-revolutionary activity'. The guillotine may have been an improvement on the stake, but I doubt whether the concentration camp has been an improvement on the guillotine.

The responsibility for these devastating doctrines lay, in the eyes of Mallet du Pan, mainly upon Rousseau. On the influence of Rousseau in shaping the revolutionary ideas he returned over and over again. Rousseau, he wrote in the *Considérations*, conceded an unlimited sovereignty to the people, without defining the people; he attributed the power of legislating to the general will, without defining the general will; he gave to that will the right of subverting at any time the body politic, without fixing the manner, nor the conditions and limits in which it should find its expression. This, he adds, has given the French interpretation of democracy its peculiar mould and character. 'Les Anglais, beaucoup plus avancés que nous dans le droit politique, ont toujours méprisé le *Contrat Social*'

In a brilliant essay on *The degree of influence which French philosophers had upon the Revolution*, published in 1799, he discussed at length the question, current in his days, whether Voltaire or Rousseau was to be held more responsible for the great upheaval. Voltaire, he pointed out, was at heart a timid conservative. Rousseau was the real prophet of the Revolution. He had thousands of followers. 'In the year 1788 I heard Marat read and comment upon the *Contrat Social* in the public gardens, amidst the plaudits of an enthusiastic audience. I could hardly mention a single revolutionist who was not transported by his anarchical theorems, and who did not burn with the desire to realise them.' It was Rousseau, and Rousseau alone, who introduced among the French the doctrine of the unlimited sovereignty of the people. And it was this doctrine which had proved obnoxious to the cause of liberty. No real freedom was possible where the rights of dissenting minorities were not respected and ensured. 'Le dogme fondamental des révolutionnaires français et de leurs émules étant celui de la souveraineté du peuple, représenté par la volonté générale, il établit le despotisme de la majorité, c'est à dire le droit du plus fort: ainsi, pour affranchir la société de la tyrannie politique, on la ramène à la tyrannie contre laquelle elle fut instituée.'

Now in the same *Essai sur le Republicanisme Français* from which I have drawn my quotation (and I have purposely given it in French) there is another and even more striking passage which deserves to be quoted at length. Mallet du Pan here enunciated the fatal law by which the extreme applications of the democratic principle would lead to plebiscitarian despotism. Years before the advent of Napoleon he predicted the irreparable process which would make dictatorship inevitable. 'Le fanatisme républicain n'est de nos jours que l'avant-coureur du désespoir de la servitude. Tel est le cercle où ce dérèglement renferme le genre humain, qu'après les saturnales de l'anarchie, viennent la toute-puissance des sans-culottes, puis les poignards de leurs factions puis le sceptre d'acier de leurs démagogues; sceptre qui pèse également sur les bourreaux et les victimes, jusqu'au moment où

un seul tyran s'en saisit, et ne ramène l'ordre qu'en étouffant toute liberté.' Once again, Mallet du Pan anticipated here all the motives of later liberal writers such as Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant. It is a curious coincidence that both the greatest theorist of continental democracy and some of its finest and ablest critics should all have been born on the shores of the lake of Geneva, that ideal meeting ground of European civilisation.

The shortcomings of French democracy would not however have produced their full consequences had they not been fostered by a particular climate of opinion which was masterly analysed by Mallet du Pan. Anyone who is familiar with Taine and his great work on the *Origines de la France contemporaine* may easily appreciate how much the latter was indebted to that analysis. It was a study of the revolutionary spirit, which found its expression in Jacobinism, but went back to something much deeper in the French and Latin character and mind. It was in fact nothing less than the spirit of political radicalism, the 'esprit de système', which 'would like to reset the range of the Alps on the lines of the Colonnade of St. Peter's': a mixture of scepticism and fanaticism, of abstract reason and of dogmatic argumentation.

Mallet du Pan has left us an admirable picture of that spirit in some of the great revolutionaries, such as Condorcet, Robespierre and especially Siéyès, that 'Catilina en petit collet', as he describes him in a striking epithet. He records an amusing anecdote of Barnave overwhelming the American ambassador, Morris, with an endless dissertation on liberty. When Barnave asked him what he thought of his republican principles: 'Je pense,' répondit froidement M. Morris, 'que vous êtes beaucoup plus républicain que moi.'

Mallet du Pan's indictment of revolutionary sophistry has much in common with Burke's. There is however an important difference. It lies in the fact that Mallet du Pan, a merciless critic of extremism in all its forms, fully realised that political radicalism was not a characteristic of the Jacobins only, but of their opponents as well. He did not hesitate to denounce the dangerous attitude of those 'jacobins d'aristocratie', of those 'bonnets rouges déguisés', of those 'Marats à cocarde blanche' which formed the rank and file of the counter-revolutionary party. He saw on both sides the same spirit of intolerance, the same indifference, or rather the same aversion to real freedom. He pointed out the terrible over-simplification of issues which the Revolution had produced: 'la modération est devenue un crime'. The excesses of the intellect had brought forth the denial of intelligence; the abuse of abstract reason had conjured up the tide of irrationalism.

A true believer in liberty, Mallet du Pan opposed the new trend with all his force. It was no use, he argued, to oppose fanaticism

with fanaticism; the power of the new ideas was too great to be crushed by mere force. 'Jamais des canons ne tuèrent des sentiments', he had written as early as 1793; and now, some years later, he bitterly remarked that 'a coalition of fools and fanatics has sprung up, and, if they succeeded in their aims, they would forbid man the faculty of seeing and thinking. They shudder at the mere sight of a book; they would like to suppress all enlightened people because lights have been misabused; they would govern the world with the sword and the whip, because some criminal and blind men had defaced the image of liberty . . . It is time to oppose these two sorts of Vandalism.'

There is one last side of Mallet du Pan's attitude to politics which I should like to mention in conclusion, perhaps because it is the one which most appeals to me, and which seems to bear more directly upon certain problems which lie ahead of us.

However critical of the French Revolution, Mallet du Pan had a clear grasp of its dramatic greatness and never indulged in a romantic idealisation of a past whose fate he considered irretrievably sealed. The old world which the Revolution had destroyed was dead, and deserved to be so. For it had been unable to stand and meet the challenge, it had refused to fight except in a 'rearguard action'. Here lay the great force of the Revolution, which was conquering the world with the same tactics with which the Jacobins had conquered France. 'Les Jacobins seuls formaient une faction, les autres n'étaient que des cabales. — They alone have shown any line of conduct, an invariable plan and a uniform system' (*Considérations*). The new masters of France had known how to exploit the irresistible appeal of the revolutionary ideas. They 'had made their opinions and decrees instrumental to the triumphs of their soldiers, and their soldiers to the establishment of their opinions and decrees'. As the Huns, according to Montesquieu, thrived upon the fears of the Romans, so did the French Directoire with the Cabinets of Europe. A policy of appeasement and compromise could only be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and did nothing but foster the lusty appetites which had been let loose.

But, above all, the triumphant progress of the Revolution would not have been conceivable had not the old world lost all faith in itself, had Europe not been as it were mesmerised into paralysis. The defenders of the old order, even those more directly menaced in their interests and in their very existence, had been unable to overcome the selfishness, the quarrels, the 'lethargy' and 'moral depression' which made them so similar to 'the Greeks of Constantinople when Mahomet II approached their walls'. This was 'the secret of the Continent' which Mallet du Pan set himself to disclose to his English friends. (*British Mercury*, Oct. 15th, 1798:

'Comparative view of the Continent and Great Britain'.) In Britain alone could he find a people which had not fallen a prey to the spiritual disease which had swept over Europe.

'Let the observer, saddened by the gloom of the interdicted Continent, and scared by its stupor, irresolution and consternation, cross the Ocean and contemplate England. It is not the sea only that separates her from the rest of Europe, but also a contrast worthy of admiration. Never was there a time when it might be said with more truth:

Et penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos. . . .

Here those gloomy dreams of irresolution, that lethargic depression, that perplexity which torture the Continent are unknown. One scarcely puts a foot ashore before a different moral atmosphere pervades us with its influence. The traveller returning from China would be less struck than he is in passing from Hamburg to Yarmouth.'

I think I have said enough to enable the reader to appreciate the reasons which made me find such pleasure in the company of Mallet du Pan. It was a comfort for a true friend of Britain and for a lover of liberty to find that old things were coming true once again. But would the reader agree that there might still be some point in reading him now? Would he agree that there may be something to learn from him in the great issues which still face us unsolved? The lesson is, that civilisation can only survive if it believes in itself, if it finds in itself the strength to oppose the challenge of disruptive forces, whatever they be. The great civilisations of the past were in most cases destroyed from without; but the menace which befalls us is perhaps more pervading and subtle. And here comes my last quotation, the finest I think, which I have kept for the end.

'Lorsque des barbares venus du Nord renversèrent l'Empire romain dans l'Occident; lorsque d'autres barbares vomis par l'Asie plantèrent l'oriflamme de Mahomet sur les murs de Constantinople, le moment était arrivé où la terre devait appartenir au plus féroce. Dans le tableau de cette mémorable subversion, on découvre l'image de celle dont l'Europe est menacée. Les Huns et les Hérules, les Vandales et les Goths, ne viendront ni du Nord ni de la Mer Noire: ils sont au milieu de nous.'

'The Huns and the Herules, the Goths and the Vandals, will come neither from the North nor from the Black Sea: they are in the very midst of us.'

## THE PROBLEM OF BIGNESS

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THE problems of the organisation of large-scale economic units appear to have received less serious attention than they deserve, at least on this side of the Atlantic. The tone of much of the academic discussion is set by such writings as Steindl's *Small and Big Business*, a monograph published by the Oxford Institute of Statistics (1943) which is permeated by implicit assumptions that size is synonymous with efficiency, that there is an inevitable tendency to the dominance of large-scale units, that Marx's 'theory of concentration has been vindicated indeed'. In popular discussion, these assumptions are accepted as self-evident truths, to be questioned only by a few reactionaries who somehow or other have never heard of the invention of the steam engine. And, as we create still larger economic units in the form of nationalised industries, it is assumed that the essential problem of organisation which they raise is solved by describing it — by the use of the magic word 'co-ordination'. The greater the failures of 'economic planning', the more do its advocates urge (and with some success) that what is wrong is that it is on too small a scale and that all will be put right if only operations can be conducted in a sufficiently 'comprehensive' and 'overall' manner.

This article will be concerned with some of the economic issues of bigness. A useful starting-point is Drucker's *Big Business* (1947); which, though avowedly a 'Study of the Political Problems of American Capitalism', is at its best in describing the problems of one giant corporation. For eighteen months Mr. Drucker studied, as an independent consultant, the organisation of the General Motors Corporation, the biggest industrial enterprise in the U.S.A., normally employing about 250,000 workers. To give some idea of relative orders of magnitude, the entire motor and aircraft industry in Great Britain has less than 600,000 workers. An enterprise of this size could be expected to demonstrate any diseconomies of unwieldiness which might accompany large-scale organisation. And so it has proved; as early as 1925 the Chairman made the following statement (not quoted by Mr. Drucker):

'In practically all our activities we seem to suffer from the inertia resulting from our great size. It seems to be hard for us to get action when it comes to a matter of putting our ideas across. There are so many people involved and it requires such a tremendous effort to

put something new into effect . . . Sometimes I am forced to the conclusion that General Motors is so large and its inertia so great that it is impossible for us to really be leaders.'

It was from this time that a solution was sought in a policy of decentralisation. The thirty separate divisions (each concerned with a group of products or stages of manufacture) into which the Corporation has progressively been separated now have a considerable degree of autonomy. The central management provides certain consultant services, approves (but does not in the first instance lay down) manufacturing programmes and sets price ranges, but 'no attempt is made to prevent Oldsmobile, for instance, from trying to displace the low-priced Buick car. No attempt is made to tell Chevrolet what prices to pay the Fisher Body Division for its bodies. No attempt is made to force the car divisions to buy its (*sic*) accessories such as lamps, from one of the General Motors divisions if the manager of a car division can show that he can get better value elsewhere'. The organisation is, indeed, an 'essay in federalism'. Apart from certain broad matters, such as new investment, the divisions operate virtually as independent concerns, and it is not an exaggeration to say that within the system there is less central control over the constituent parts than is visualised for the British economy by the advocates of overall planning.

In the nature of the case, it is impossible to determine how successful this policy has been in making the Corporation efficient and 'progressive'. The worst manifestations of elephantiasis seem to have been checked and the Corporation seems to be able to hold its own with its (smaller) competitors. Yet difficulties of an order which may yet be decisive remain. Of these, that which gives the Corporation most concern is how to secure men of sufficient ability, and with the right combination of specialised skill and general imagination and understanding, needed to control so vast an organisation. And even if such men exist and can be found, there is still the problem of 'breaking the isolation' in which they 'inevitably' live, 'which endangers the survival and efficiency' of the Corporation. General Motors have established a vast apparatus for selection and training, and then for continuous exchange of ideas to create 'a common understanding' (thus, at the top, the Chairman has two extended meetings a year, each attended by two or three hundred senior executives, individuals being invited in rotation). But the results are uncertain; what is certain is that, without continuous effort on an elaborate scale, the Corporation would soon relapse into that inertia from which it tried to escape after 1925. Here is the heart of the problem of size; it has long been a commonplace among economists that for any enterprise there is an optimum size, beyond which further growth will bring a decline in efficiency, and this

size is in large measure determined by inherent limitations of management.

The elaborate systems of control and organisation which mark the big business are not necessarily signs, or guarantees, of efficiency; they are costly attempts to solve problems created by size which do not exist for the small concern. A large organisation can operate only by sub-dividing and delegating duties and responsibilities among a number of individuals. As soon as devolution of control occurs, there arises the problem of co-ordinating the activities of the individuals. But co-ordination means the achievement of consistency among the actions of individuals who are of necessity acting independently, and this means reference to a common centre, which must involve some duplication of effort, continuous exchange of information, and expenditure of time (i.e. delay). To put it in simple terms, it means that A, the supreme head, the co-ordinator, must know broadly what B, C, D and the rest are doing, each of whom must know something of what the others are doing; it means that B cannot take any important action not already provided for in his instructions without seeking permission from A, who cannot give it without first consulting C and D, and so on. Moreover, the problems of co-ordination grow more rapidly than the increase in size; it is in some ways a matter of kind rather than degree. Various systems of administration and management are but so many attempts to deal with this problem; but they cannot circumvent the fundamental obstacle, that more delegation intensifies the difficulty of co-ordination. There is, indeed, a choice: the structure can either be 'co-ordinated', in which case there will be little room for individual initiative, with consequent dangers of inertia and atrophy, or it can be decentralised, in which case it may avoid those dangers but at the cost of waste and mismanagement resulting from the lack of control by those most interested in securing economy.

There is a good deal of evidence that very large concerns are not in fact as efficient as smaller enterprises. The general experience in the United States has been that the big mergers in the two periods of intense trust-formation (1890-1904 and 1919-28) have on the whole failed to achieve the results expected by their promoters, and in many cases have fared less well than the previous experience of their constituent units would have suggested. Again, a careful study by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission applied six different tests of efficiency to various groups of factories and firms of different sizes, in 18 industries and making various different products; in all there were 233 cases, and it was found that 'large size was most efficient . . . in approximately 11 per cent of the total tests [i.e. cases], medium size was most efficient in approximately 55 per cent of the tests, and small size was most efficient in approximately 35 per cent of the

tests'.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the British Working Parties which during the past two years have been investigating the organisation and problems of various industries (Reports on ten industries have so far been published) have in general produced no evidence to suggest that the smaller firms in the various industries are less efficient than the large ones, or that larger units would be more efficient than those found today.

Yet in popular opinion (as well as among some economists) the view persists that not merely is great size synonymous with efficiency, but that *only* giant concerns can exploit the economies available to 'modern' industry. As well as a failure to appreciate the essential problem of large-scale administration,<sup>2</sup> there appear to be several major misconceptions involved, which can be discussed under three broad heads. First, there is confusion about the meaning of efficiency. As a first approximation, which contains so much of the truth that it usually needs little modification, efficiency consists of achieving a given result with the use of the minimum amount of resources. This may appear (and is) trite, but it is remarkable how far it is neglected, and with what unfortunate results. To take a very recent example, an official report on Cement Costs refers to works at which costs are high in order to ask whether 'the reason is inefficiency' or some 'local or special handicap such as a high delivered cost of coal, or the character of the raw materials'. Presumably a cement works situated on the top of a mountain, to which coal and raw materials had to be transported from one end of the country, and then the product carried to the other end, could be supremely efficient — even though far more resources (including transport) had to be used to produce cement than were required for a more favourably-situated works. To consider only some of the more obvious factors affecting efficiency, and not the whole, is a common error, likely to lead to serious mistakes of policy; it is, for instance, the basis of much over-estimation of the gains to be derived from the re-equipment of industry.

Though the simplicity of this definition would need some modification in certain circumstances, it still remains the surest guide. It is often objected that economic efficiency in this sense does not

<sup>1</sup> Temporary National Economic Committee, Monograph No. 13, *Relative Efficiency of Large, Medium-sized and Small Business* (1941). The methods used in this study have been subject to some criticism; but the criticisms are those which could be directed against *any* inductive study, which necessarily cannot be completely free from ambiguity. There seems little reason to doubt the general validity of the results.

<sup>2</sup> STEINDL (*op. cit.*) dismisses this with the words: 'these diseconomies of management, in spite of the importance attributed to them by some economists [Mr. Austin Robinson has a footnote reference here] seem to have only minor importance in practice'.

allow for certain social costs. A standard case is found in the changing location of industry in Britain in the inter-war years, with the existence of concentrated unemployment in the depressed areas, and all the human misery which resulted. Even though the changing geographical pattern of industrial activity was dictated by economic efficiency, should not the broad social effects have been considered, and policy shaped accordingly? There is here a real difficulty; but its importance tends to be magnified. For it is not true, as so often seems to be assumed, that economic efficiency and social welfare always, or even usually, pull in different directions. In the large, indeed, they must coincide, for we cannot have the benefits which social policy regards as desirable unless we first have, and maintain, economic efficiency in the sense defined. Because of this, the onus of proof in the individual case must rest on those who would subordinate economic efficiency to some social objective.

If we are clear on the meaning of efficiency, we shall see that the elaborate organisations of large concerns, impressive though they may be in their marble halls, are not evidence, or necessary conditions, of great efficiency; they may well be evidence of relative inefficiency, in that they involve the use of resources not required by the small producers. Some economics text-books point to the ability of the large concerns to employ the most expensive (and therefore presumably the ablest) technicians, accountants, and other skilled workers, as one of their advantages over the small concern. The truth is rather that the large concern *needs* to employ these scarce resources, and the larger it becomes the more imperative it is that it should find the 'best men' if its operations are to be controlled with any approach to efficiency. But the best men are very few, and there may not be enough to go round.

The second popular misconception is the exaggeration of the economies which can be derived from large-scale units. A vague but strongly-held faith in the advantages of mass-production is the underlying element here; it has now been fortified by misinterpretation of war-time experience in the manufacture of certain munitions and in concentration schemes in other industries.

There are reasons why production on a large scale of a commodity can, *up to a point*, be more efficient than production on a small scale. These are sufficiently well known (though they are often misinterpreted); they are largely dependent on industrial technique and the use of large units of capital equipment. The proviso of *up to a point* is important; not only may the technical economies be exhausted far more quickly than is often realised (in which case a giant plant becomes simply the multiplication of units each of which, operated independently, would be as technically efficient as the whole plant), but also the diseconomies of organisation may appear at an even

earlier stage. It now seems fairly certain, for instance, that the Ford plant at Willow Run, built with all the best modern developments, has proved less efficient than smaller plants, being well beyond the size needed to get maximum technical economies and too big to be efficiently organised. This is in a manufacture in which the technical economies of size are great, in which mass-production is specially appropriate. In many industries, however, these economies are exhausted in what would normally be regarded as quite a small plant; numerous examples could be quoted (from the U.S.A. as well as Britain), but we can be content with a citation from one of the Working Parties. The boot and shoe industry is one in which manufacture is 'carried on under conditions which increasingly approximate to mass production'. Yet, of a total of 808 factories in 1935, the great majority had less than 200 workers, only 14 had more than 1000 workers, and the average size was 134 workers. In spite of this, the Working Party concluded that 'the industry is highly competitive, and the general level of efficiency is such that we do not find any striking and far-reaching economies that could be made by reorganisation'.

Moreover, the technical economies of mass-production belong more to the individual works or plant, than to the firm or company, to which in fact they are not often directly relevant. Yet it is the firm which is usually meant when reference is made to big units of enterprise — General Motors, or Imperial Chemicals, and not one factory owned by General Motors or I.C.I. — and the economies of mass-production cited as the reason for their great size. This confusion has had, and now has, important consequences. In Britain in the inter-war years many schemes of 'rationalisation' of industry were able to command approval because of the expectation that they would secure economies in production for which in fact they were quite inappropriate; even now the idea still lingers that a reduction in the number of *firms* in an industry will automatically bring about production economies which belong to individual *works*.

Although much of the popular case for larger concerns falls to the ground if this distinction is kept clearly in mind, it is not denied that the large concern, owning several plants, may have open to it certain other economies for which a single plant capable of exploiting to the full the technical economies of mass-production would still be too small. It is not easy to evaluate these economies. Some are analogous to the technical economies of production on a large scale, and rest in discontinuities or indivisibilities of the factors of production (when the most expensive skills have to be employed it is an economy to spread them over as big an output as possible) or in the fullest exploitation of specialisation. Others, however, are often more in the nature of a bargaining advantage rather than a

real economy of resources. What is certain, however, is that for each firm, as well as for each plant, there is a point beyond which they are offset by the diseconomies of organisation and inefficiency sets in. And it is probable that in most industries the economies usually associated with mass-production will have been exhausted well before this point.

The third misconception rests on historical misinterpretation (or ignorance), which is then applied to the present and projected into the future. It has a good Marxian foundation, and is that the scale of enterprise has been continuously increasing, that the economic system is now dominated by huge corporations, and that there is an inevitable trend towards still larger monopolistic concerns. In reality, however, for several decades the general growth in size appears to have been comparatively slow. To take fairly recent data, in the United States the average size of plant in manufacturing industry, measured by the number of workers employed, increased from 64 workers in 1914 to 86 workers in 1937.<sup>1</sup> The increase in the size of firms has probably been more rapid — but it is, of course, the size of plant which would be affected by the techniques of mass-production. The movement in Britain has probably been even less marked.

When we look at the present time, we do not see a picture dominated at all points by large concerns. Of the 174,000 firms in British manufacturing industry in 1935, only 650 had over a thousand employees each; the large majority (132,000) had less than eleven workers each. The 650 large concerns had 28 per cent of all workers employed in manufacturing industry, while the very small firms had less than 10 per cent of this total. When we go outside manufacturing industry, then, with the exception of certain public utilities (particularly rail transport), the large concern is even less typical. In building and contracting, for example, there were in 1935 only 31 firms employing over a thousand workers each, their total employment equivalent to 7.5 per cent of the industry; at the other end of the scale, there were tens of thousands of very small firms with less than eleven workers each, together comprising one-third of the industry — and the relative importance of these had been growing during the previous decade. The pattern of manufacturing industry in the United States is much the same as in this country, while statistics for all forms of economic activity, of a kind not available for Britain (they include, for example, the distributive trades) show that of about 3½ million 'business units' of all types, almost one-half are one-man enterprises with no employees, and that less than 2 per cent have more than fifty employees each.

<sup>1</sup> This excludes plants (comprising the majority of all plants) with less than 6 workers.

Even though the vast majority of business units are small, and the very large units employ a minority of the workers and produce a minority of the output, it is often urged that, in some undefined way, the large unit is 'typical' of modern industry. Mr. Drucker holds this view and justifies it by an unproved assumption and sweeping generalisation — mass-production is typical of modern industry, mass-production requires the large corporation, therefore the large corporation is the 'representative' form of modern industrial organisation. More plausible is the line of argument that the very large concerns are the leaders, allowing the small concerns to exist on sufferance. In some industries this situation does exist, with a firm or a group of firms sufficiently powerful to set and enforce a price policy; a typical example is the United States steel industry (which also illustrates the fact that it does not follow that the leader is more efficient than the smaller firms). But it does not apply to more than a fraction — substantial though it may be — of industry. In Britain, such data as are available suggest that perhaps between one-fifth and one-quarter of the total industrial output is liable to this dominance of the large concern. In the United States the proportion appears to be somewhat higher, and may be about one-third. Even in an industry dominated by a large concern, the smaller firms (though they could be crushed by a price-war sustained by the bigger resources of the giant) may be just as progressive as, and more efficient than, the leader. The elaborate and expensive arrangements often made by large concerns to prevent their position from being undermined is good evidence of the potential strength of competition from the smaller concerns.

Moreover, it is rarely the case that the consumer has no alternative but to buy from, or at prices set by, a monopoly or a market leader; there are few commodities for which there are no substitutes available. It is not, of course, gainsaid that monopolisation may cause a misdirection of resources, with some consumers forced to use substitutes which give them less satisfaction than they would get from the original article at a competitive price; but it is still true that the presence of alternatives in the economic system reduces the significance of a given degree of monopolisation in some parts of the system. Technical change, far from inevitably favouring the growth of large concerns, could often operate to weaken and destroy them; the monopoly of the railways was seriously threatened by road transport (hence the need for a nationalised transport system to control road as well as rail traffic).

So far from large-scale concerns being an inevitable development, necessitated by modern techniques, and the essential means of securing the economies of mass production, there is abundant evidence that a search for increased efficiency is not by any means

the primary cause of their growth. Some very large concerns may achieve a high degree of efficiency (though many do not) but it is rarely true that this is their underlying object. That is to be found elsewhere, in some cases personal ambitions, in others an attempt to obtain control over a substantial part of the market, to give protection from direct competition, or greater revenues from maintaining or raising prices. There are, however, certain factors which can assist, and encourage, the big concern to grow still bigger, even though it may become less efficient in the process. The law relating to limited liability, and to patents, the organisation of finance, the possibility of using undistributed profits for further expansion, however uneconomic it may be, the incidence of heavy direct taxation, are but some of these. They are powerful factors, and of far-reaching importance; together with direct state intervention to establish monopolies, they explain much of such concentration as now exists. But there is nothing inevitable about them.

The increasing concern of Government with economic organisation also plays its part. Even when it does not involve the establishment of some form of monopoly (as it usually did in the inter-war years), intervention by the state seems almost invariably to favour both the established and the large concerns. Government controls usually operate with reference to some base period (it is difficult to see how they could do otherwise) and this automatically gives an advantage to the existing concern and places an obstacle in the way of a newcomer. Further, there is usually need for continuous discussion and negotiation between Government and 'the industry'; this means some form of representation from the producers — when the Government states that it has consulted 'the industry' it means that it has asked a Trade Association for its views, or perhaps just talked with Sir A. B. or Mr. X. Y. of the leading firm. To the busy administrator, indeed, a monopolised industry is much more congenial than one which consists of numerous firms which cannot 'speak with one voice' and possesses 'recalcitrant minorities'. Not only is the large firm thus favoured, but the habit of consultation among independent producers is encouraged, perhaps some form of organisation forced upon them, with the result that there is fruitful ground for amalgamations which might otherwise never have occurred.

The nationalisation of an industry is likely to present even more formidable problems of organisation than would result from the creation of a privately-operated unit of comparable size. The case for nationalisation never seems to have rested upon any serious analysis of the effects on efficiency. In the popular view, it is assumed without question that the bigger the unit the more efficient it will be, that 'production for use and not for profit' will automatically solve

all problems by releasing pent-up energies which have been stifled under private enterprise, and that 'co-ordination' will eliminate the wastes of 'chaotic competition'. More serious discussion has recognised the existence of a problem in the absence of the profit motive and competition as stimuli to efficiency, and various ingenious devices to replace them (or to re-introduce them by the back door) have been proposed. The virtues of nationalisation as seen by some economists do not therefore lie in any direct increase of efficiency, but in the (theoretical) possibilities of manipulating outputs and prices in accordance with certain canons of economic welfare.

The problem of administering an organisation as large as a nationalised industry would be formidable enough in any circumstances. We can recall the problem as it faced General Motors, add that the British coal industry employs more than three times as many workers as General Motors, and then emphasise that the difficulties of co-ordination increase more rapidly than the size of the organisation. It is clear that exceptional ability will be required at the centre, perhaps so exceptional as to be non-existent, and that even then a policy of decentralisation will be essential if the industry is not to be paralysed into inactivity. Many advocates of nationalisation have, in fact, realised this, and their model is one of local autonomy in production matters with central control of some 'strategic' factors. Again, however, this is as much a description of the ideal as a formula for success. Again there is the broad choice, either co-ordination or devolution, with the danger that it will not be taken and that instead there will be an unhappy compromise.

Further, there is a lack of adequate criteria of efficiency, consequent on the abolition of a competitive market. This again is a matter which has caused some concern among economist-advocates of nationalisation, and they usually propose the establishment of internal competition between the managers of different plants, and are insistent that matters such as new investment should be subject to certain tests analogous to those of the market. Even if their advice were followed (and the general presumption, confirmed by present experience, is that it will not be), there would still be large areas of arbitrariness. The experience of General Motors is again instructive; in spite of competition from other firms and from the second-hand market, there were many aspects of their activities for which they could find no reliable criteria of efficiency, and even the most elaborate systems of cost accounting were no substitute. The solution was to re-introduce the market wherever possible, and it was for this reason that the manager of any division was made free to buy materials or accessories from outside firms. But it is a solution which can have only a limited application in the monopolistic conditions of a nationalised industry. On a wider perspective, it

seems that the advocates of the use of a pricing system as a guide to production in a collectivist society are on unsafe ground; the market can either be allowed to work or it can be suspended, but it cannot at one and the same time be abolished as the decisive mechanism and yet retained as a yardstick.

Finally, the form of control which is being adopted for nationalised industries seems peculiarly designed to emphasise the administrative problems. The public board first appeared on a national scale twenty years ago with the establishment of the B.B.C. and the Central Electricity Board, in order to operate the services involved (which were thought to require a monopoly) on business lines, but without private profit, and to keep them 'out of politics'. The general view is that this was 'a convenient compromise and worked fairly well'.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to doubt this; it is true that the services concerned did not dissolve into chaos, but beyond that the criteria of efficiency are absent, and it is impossible to tell whether a different system would have given as good, or better, service at less cost. It may be questioned whether it is desirable to keep out of politics matters which the state has made its concern — the transition to an exercise of authority granted by Parliament but without responsibility to Parliament may be too easy, and it is significant that the keenest advocates of 'independent' Central Authorities are those who wish their particular objects to be achieved without interference from Parliament or the law.<sup>2</sup> In any case it seems clear that the activities of major nationalised industries cannot be kept out of politics. Because of this, there is a confusion of responsibility which might have the most unfortunate effects. Formal responsibility is given to the Board, but the appropriate Minister has undefined powers to interfere, with results seen in the recent operations of the National Coal Board. The charge that the methods of the Board are 'bureaucratic' has not much real substance — it is not much more than another way of saying that the industry to be administered is very big. What is disconcerting is that the Board seems to be an extra Government department responsible to a Minister who already has one department to look after, and with no clear understanding of which body is responsible for what. In these circumstances we might well get a situation in which the industry is not kept out of politics, not run as a business for profit nor operated on non-profit-making business lines, nor administered as a Government department, but manages to combine (in an unco-ordinated accidental fashion) the worst features of each.

The final stage of bigness which we have so far experienced is the

<sup>1</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, September 3rd, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the recommendations of the (Scott) Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas (1942).

attempt to control the major part of the nation's economic life. Nothing will be said here of war-time experience, for, even if its lessons were unambiguous (which they are not), there were certain special features which do not exist in time of peace and which make analogy highly misleading.<sup>1</sup> Nor will anything be said of broad issues of economic policy. The present necessity of controls is not called into question; it may be that without them our situation would in some ways be even more intolerable than it is now. But is it open to doubt that from the point of view of economic efficiency the system compares unfavourably with the working of the pre-war mechanism of a free (albeit imperfect) market? Even the most ardent advocates of planning have hardly a good word to say for its present manifestation, and urge the remedy of a further extension of controls and their overall 'co-ordination'.

The resources absorbed by the controls are so substantial as to place upon their advocates a heavy burden of proof of their necessity, a matter which is too often overlooked. The increase in the numbers employed in central Government administration alone is equivalent to the reduction in unemployment now as compared with pre-war — this is where the gain from achieving full employment has gone. Yet apparently this is not enough to prevent a marked decline in the standards of even day-to-day Government administration. The recently-published Third Report from the Committee on Public Accounts gives numerous cases of serious waste and maladministration, with the almost invariable explanation of inadequacy of staff. And, an item which is still more often overlooked, an appreciable amount of man-power outside Government service is absorbed in filling up forms and performing other functions necessary for the operation of controls. From the point of view of the number of workers engaged, the controls are now one of our greatest national industries.

In spite of this vast absorption of resources, the results are far from satisfactory. The delays and frustrations experienced by businessmen and citizens are too general to need comment. Instances of factories in which production is held up because of lack of one component or material are becoming more and more common; and a factory which has all its requisites in the right quantities and proportions is becoming a collector's piece. The reason is, of course, the operation of a series of controls which are not 'co-ordinated'. The following quotation from a letter to the press by the manager of a chemical firm puts the position concretely:

'Some of our formulae contain over 15 different raw materials which have to be obtained through three or four Ministries. The

<sup>1</sup> See PROFESSOR LIONEL ROBBINS, *The Economic Problem in Peace and War* (The Marshall Lectures, 1947), pp. 43-56.

fact that we obtain an export licence and permits from three Ministries carries no weight with the fourth Department should this Department decide to refuse us a licence.

The fact that the four Departments grant us a permit to manufacture a product for export is no guarantee that we shall receive an export licence.

Today the first question which arises upon receipt of an order from abroad is: "Is it worth the time and trouble to start the dreary round of letters, calls, and explanations to the various Ministries concerned?"

What is surprising is not that this should be the state of affairs, but that anyone should be so innocent as to expect it to be otherwise. It is the inevitable result of an attempt to control a highly complex system, and the answer to the plea that it should be avoided by more co-ordination is that it cannot — except, perhaps, at the cost of complete paralysis. To follow out the case cited (which, it should be realised, is a very simple one), there are four Ministries involved in controlling the materials concerned because the job is too big to be done by one individual; however attractive it may sound to have materials controlled 'as a whole', it is just not practicable, and the work must be divided among a large number of individuals, each with some knowledge of the detail in his own field. Even if all materials could be controlled by one individual, a particular firm might be allowed some and refused others, simply because some are scarcer than others. As soon as responsibility is divided, however, there arises much more scope for inconsistency, with different individuals (or Ministries) giving different weight to the many factors which must be considered, and (because much must necessarily be left to personal judgments) with the intrusion of purely personal factors. No amount of laying down of general 'principles' can avoid this.

To super-impose a co-ordinator would mean not only added delay in dealing with applications (which now would have to be considered at yet another level), but also the over-riding of some of the decisions of those more immediately responsible, with the danger of friction of a kind which seriously affects administration. Moreover, even if the controllers play fair and supply all the information they believe to be relevant, the co-ordinator must necessarily work in ignorance of much that it is necessary to know in order to give the right decisions — after all, if one man could in the first instance know all that were necessary there would be no need for divided responsibilities. The case is little different if instead of a co-ordinator we have co-ordination by discussion — again there is delay, and the results are compromises which may be worse than inconsistent decisions. We are back to our main proposition: there is a choice between co-ordination and devolution.

Most of the problems of economic organisation are far more complex than this example, which is concerned with only one type, and that the simplest, of control. An attempt to introduce more co-ordination between departmental economic policies (as distinct from the day-to-day controls) might stifle some of the hurried improvisations now familiar, but the carefully co-ordinated measures would lag even further behind the events they are supposed to control, and be even less appropriate to the problems they are supposed to solve, than is the case at present. This is not an imaginary picture; in addition to its inherent probability it was often proved during the war (in the United States and Germany as well as in this country), when departments (or individuals) directly concerned got on with the job while the bodies supposed to be co-ordinating them were still deciding upon common units of measurement, consistent targets, and the like, or struggling to secure agreement among themselves on issues of policy. We can adopt Adam Smith's dictum, given in a slightly different context, that the task of co-ordinating so complex a system is one 'which could be safely trusted to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it'.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties of the present situation are enhanced by the tendency of the controls to stifle individual enterprise, and yet to take it for granted, and to put nothing in its place, as the motive force behind economic activity. The operation of the controls assumes, in fact, that there are people wanting to do more than our available resources will allow, and that the administration can then step in and select which things can be allowed, and, if necessary, persuade the fortunate individual who is allowed to go ahead to accept some modification of his plans. This assumption may not always be valid; it shows signs of breaking down now, when under the stress of the special brand of suppressed inflation which we have developed, too few people want to do the 'right' things and too many the 'wrong'. In the absence of any instruments of coercion, the controls are then powerless to shape the system in the way desired. The effects of the stifling of individual enterprise will not be discussed here, important though they are. It is, however, generally overlooked that the qualities which count in business become less those needed to secure efficiency and more those needed to conduct negotiations with Government departments. The most successful (and therefore most valuable) executive may not be he who can secure real economies, but he who can persuade the administrator to modify a quota or allocation, or to adopt some particular policy. The effects on our economic efficiency may be vitally important.

<sup>1</sup> *Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter 2.

It is realisation both of the administrative weaknesses of a large centralised organisation and of the need to encourage, and not frustrate, individual enterprise that has led to various attempts to find a *via media* by those who believe that some measure of planning is inevitable. As Professor Robertson<sup>1</sup> has shown, however, the kinds of solution suggested usually depend upon some distinction which could not be maintained in practice, or which is based on misleading analogy, as that between the Government and the private sectors of the economic system, or between strategic and tactical decisions.

The advocates of 'overall' and 'comprehensive' planning have a certain logic on their side. Because of the intricate interdependence of all parts of the economic system, intervention at one point will have many indirect effects at other points. A simple illustration of the first degree can be found in the effects of the fuel cuts earlier this year; although they were supposedly administered to bear least heavily on 'essential' industries, it was found at a later stage that some of these 'essential' industries were held up — because 'in-essential' industries supplying them with some apparently minor requisite had had no coal. The indirect effects are often very subtle and may not become apparent for some time after the immediate action. Moreover, a control directed towards one objective may be frustrated by developments in uncontrolled spheres, as is only too apparent at the present time. A partially-controlled system may thus assume a strong resemblance to the croquet game in 'Alice in Wonderland'. And, in fact, once the process of planning is started at one point there is an almost inevitable growth, as the repercussions spread and create new problems which have to be dealt with, and as it is seen that now something here, now something there, must also be brought under control if the original purpose is not to be frustrated; this is one of the most striking of the valid lessons of war-time experience. Thus it may well be argued that if you are going to control anything significant you must control everything.

The case against this is, however, overwhelming. Aside from the possibility of disastrously wrong decisions by the planners, of the possible effects on economic progress, of the almost certain loss of political liberty, on all of which our present partial planning gives us danger signals in plenty, overall planning would be hopelessly inefficient, simply because of the virtual impossibility of administering an organisation as big as the national economy. We can cite again the example of the administration of the fuel cuts; here was one self-contained problem, only one incident in a much larger complex of inter-acting parts, yet even this was too big and too

<sup>1</sup> 'The Economic Outlook.' Presidential Address to Section F of the British Association, 1947. To be reprinted in the *Economic Journal*, December 1947.

complex to be administered in other than a fumbling, hit-or-miss fashion, with all kinds of unforeseen results. Again the dilemma is inescapable; either the planning is 'co-ordinated', in which case the tempo of activity is disastrously slowed down, or it is based on wholesale devolution, in which case it is not 'comprehensive' and the benefits which are expected from it cannot accrue.

A committee sponsored by the Fabian Society, in a recent report on 'The Reform of the Higher Civil Service', has seen that 'there may be only two choices: to agree to less Government activity, including planning; or to watch the economic life of the country slow down'. Characteristically, however, they decide that 'neither alternative is acceptable', that the 'regulatory functions of the Civil Service must be developed to include overall planning', and the solution to the dilemma is to be found in better organisation and (we are back to General Motors) improved methods of recruitment and training of the administrators. This, however, is once more to solve the problem by stating it; while there may be room for some improvements in methods (though how far at the cost of further weakening of the protection against arbitrariness is a point of some importance) this barely touches the fringe of the question. The big industrial concern, whose methods constitute the model to be followed by the Civil Service, has exactly the same problem, lessened only by the smaller scale of its task. The elephant is normally a slow-moving animal; scientists have proved to us that she could not possibly be five times as big as she is, since the increase in the size of her legs needed to carry the weight would make her completely immobile. No amount of streamlining, of smoothing out of wrinkles, of tricking out in the appropriate costume, would then turn her into a ballerina; yet this is what the comprehensive planners, as well as the Fabians, want.

The ultimate choice is not between a little more or a little less planning; it is between a controlled and a free system. As Professor Robertson<sup>1</sup> suggests, there may well be a difference in kind, not merely one of degree and pace, between an economy which is planned and one in which economic affairs are decided by the market (subject, of course, to state action in many spheres, such as redistributive taxation, social security, etc., but of a kind which leaves the market intact). The market mechanism provides a means by which the decentralised decisions of innumerable individuals are automatically and impersonally co-ordinated; it overcomes the problems of size and works with a precision and subtlety which no administrator can ever hope to achieve. Far from being an out-moded device, inappropriate to 'modern' conditions, its advantages over 'conscious co-ordination' have become greater with increasing

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*

specialisation and complexity — it is for this reason that (the words are those of Lord Keynes) 'the advantage to efficiency of the decentralisation of decisions and of individual responsibility is even greater, perhaps, than the nineteenth century supposed'. The alternative to overall planning is on the one hand to create conditions in which the market mechanism is free to perform its essential functions and on the other to correct disharmonies (such as mass unemployment) and modify certain undesirable effects (such as extreme inequality). This is not an easy task, for it will demand important institutional changes, while to correct disharmonies and yet maintain the essential framework and operation of free enterprise involves difficult issues of economic technique and of public policy. But it is no more difficult than the task of overall planning, the problems of which are made to appear simple by the easy processes of ignoring them or exorcising them with catchwords.

## PROGRESS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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THE idea of Progress at this time has the anomalous position of being both dead and alive. On the one hand, half the vocal world goes to fantastic lengths to avoid it like an unclean animal or a split infinitive; on the other, it thrives with shameless fluency in public usage, in the titles of small books on sociology, letters to the press, public speeches and other places where public opinion may be found in the raw. Nor can this strange survival be attributed entirely to lack of sophistication on this part of public opinion, without premissing a ridiculous omniscience and wisdom on the part of the rest. While it is true that to the anti-Progress party belong mainly the more intellectual, the cleverer, more knowledgeable and more ingenious men, the philosophers and sophists of this time — and also true that the Progress men are those most concerned with practical affairs, as politicians or demagogues, social reformers, creators and zealots of all kinds — while, that is to say, intellectual men have rejected what practical men have retained — this cannot be accepted as a measure of superior ability or subtler vision. On the contrary, the extra subtlety of the intellectuals is the measure, as often appears, of an aloofness from the general opinion which may equally nullify as emphasise their thought. Intellectual opinion, fostered hothouse fashion in intellectual circles, may be (in time) equally behind as ahead of or contemporary with general opinion, and it is no less true that an isolated thinker may shake the world, than that what general opinion accepts today, the intellectuals will rationalise tomorrow. In connection with Progress, the point is worth insisting on in order to remove at the outset any false impression that the abhorers are the more 'advanced' party, that they are in the lead and that the mote which they have cast out of their own eye will in time be removed from all eyes.

Between two parties thus holding opposite views on the same subject, one might perhaps expect to find disagreement. The intellectual and the practical worlds, after all, are not so distinct as to be insulated. Yet this is not the case; the former does not inveigh against pit-baths and housing schemes, nor does the latter fail to back its progressive schemes with a sound progressive ideology. And indeed, wherever the two worlds actually overlap, the very intellectuals who most vehemently flog the dead body of Progress are seen to be at the same time the most energetic of improvers.

Those who call the apple green not only do not come to blows with those who call it red, but are often themselves the most confirmed reddeners.

So, a definition. Or rather, if the thing has two heads, two definitions. But it is not so easy. Indeed, even the well-known book which traces the history of the idea of progress from Athens to the Great Exhibition is free of any attempt to isolate and define the idea itself.

The first characteristics of twentieth-century Progress to be pinned down are those of simplicity and practicality. It deals, as one should expect of any opinion generally held by the body of people, with the daily considerations of society, that is, mainly with the standard of living; in which it stands for such improvements as that the children of those who went barefoot should wear shoes, that the life of the miner should be cleaner and pleasanter, that rickets should be abolished by supplying a sufficiency of milk, that medical attention should be ample and equal to all irrespective of their ability to buy it — in general, that we should all live in reasonable comfort, with leisure and the means to enjoy it, with education and the means to profit by it, fortified through our whole life by a guarantee from the rest of our society that we shan't have to forfeit these good things either in old age, or through economic dislocation, or because of misjudgment, stupidity or lack of zeal on our own part. The minimum standard of living is to be raised, and guaranteed by a system of mutual obligation which says that rich and poor shall hang together, rather than the poor hang separately. On all sides, the desirability of this object is held to be self-evident; and the putting it into effect is what this century means, in great part, by Progress.

So far we may say that twentieth-century Progress is an idea which concerns itself with material things. It is not asserted, for instance, that pit-head religious services, or canteen concerts of sacred music, are part of the progressive order. Baths and calories are the main concern. And if organised religion be put on one side, it is equally not asserted (what would *prima facie* be a much more plausible course if the object were the happiness of great numbers) that the State should teach people to see beauty and appreciate works of art. On the contrary, it is recognised that spiritual pleasure is the privilege of the well-fed; when we speak of full lives, we mean full bellies. Nevertheless, twentieth-century Progress must have its moral side. When we say that poverty, hunger and disease are bad, we do not mean inexpedient. If we did, we should in the general opinion be wrong: not mistaken, but morally wrong-headed, bad in a moral sense, wicked. We probably believe that contented men do not commit crimes, but even if we do not, we think as a general rule that men ought to be given grounds for contentment; not to make life easy for

the magistrate, but because it would be morally wrong to deny them. Whatever importance one may attach to it, this moral sense must be recognised as part of the twentieth century and as dominant in the moral sphere as social improvement in the physical. Again, Progress has its organised religion, which concerns itself with the civic life; and when we accept the desirability of workers co-operating in management, citizens practising citizenship, and everyone taking an intelligent interest in political life, we are not only being good socialists, good conservatives, good Christians, and men of reason, but are also proving the orthodoxy of our Progress. Abou ben Adhems of a later age, we love our fellow men. We worship the god of the Good Society, and if heaven exists we are prepared to enter by the side door.

International affairs press on us with less urgency than domestic, but still, when war can destroy all, claim a big share in the sum of total thought. So Progress at home is matched by Progress abroad. If to be killed is unpleasant, to forfeit in addition the benefits of an improving civilisation is unthinkable. The fatter the pig, the more it squeals. So in order to insure ourselves against the disaster of defeat, we try more and more to prevent a fight. To this end, we postulate a world society, in which nations are to behave like parliamentarians, and be governed by majority rule: that is, the few strong and confident states are to be restrained by the many apprehensive ones. We call the nations united and organise them, and hope that the power of law, which is possessed by familiar and old national institutions, will be born similarly in a new and world-wide one. Many believe in and many despair of the success of this venture; but none, in the West, is indifferent to it; all wish that it might succeed; and all, if it does succeed, will count it as progress made. The doubt which many have about its efficacy and the protective cynicism about its methods which is expressed so often, serve only to emphasise the general belief. It would be so easy to say, after pointing to the defects of UNO, 'This won't work. It ought never to be tried'; that the absence of such comment is significant; we say instead 'This won't work. But it is right to try'. Right, naturally, in the moral sense, for we do not normally admit that to be killed is any less wicked than to kill.

The West, then, has both feet firmly on the ground and head well below the clouds. It believes in the improvement of conditions of living and the removal of the chances of dying. General opinion demands that these ends be pursued. To the means, it gives the name Progress. But the improvement of living conditions and removal of war are themselves only means to an end: and this end people call Security.

The view is often heard that Security and Progress are different,

conflicting and even antithetical ideas. Progress, a moving, advancing, confident philosophy, went out, according to this view, at the end of the nineteenth century; to be replaced after a period of turmoil by the static, defensive, fearful philosophy, Security. That such a convenient juxtaposition of opposites can in fact be the true picture is put quite out of court by the present reality, for both catchwords issue commonly from the same mouth. In the general opinion they are compatible. Now the general opinion may be fallible, but not to the extent of harbouring radical opposites, and if it speaks of Progress and Security in the same breath then, labels notwithstanding, it must be thinking of the same thing. By Progress, it means improvement. Improvement is change for the better. By Security it means freedom from want, from disease and from war; the attainment of which involves also change for the better. It may be said that once attained, Security no longer calls for Progress; but such a proposition remains hypothetical, so long as Security remains to be attained. We know, at heart, that our reason is too firmly relative for this ever to be so. We recognise that our ambitions are limitless and Security must be elastic; and if it is objected that in this case we have a strange idea of Security, *that* is the truest remark yet; it is simply the label which we use to justify our belief in Progress at a time when circumstances seem to be so strongly set against it. Whatever the logic of the situation would seem to dictate, whatever Security *ought* to mean and however one may interpret its implications, we cannot in fact get free of the fundamental assumptions in which we and many ancestors were brought up, that change is natural and normally good. This assumption is basic. Nobody wastes his time in deploring that he has not four hands and a tail, instead of two hands and no tail. Ignoring the loss of three useful members, he contentedly accepts two hands, is even glad of the loss, because it makes him what he is. Similarly other changes, when a man looks back at them, have in some degree or other the same character of inevitability and benefit. Man has perhaps proposed, perhaps stayed passive; certainly the disposition has been in other hands. But the change has made him what he is, which on the whole he likes; as he is bound to, since the alternative is miserable loneliness. Therefore the change was good, and any minor deficiency in his present state must be corrected by more change. This fortunate teleological instinct happily given us by nature forms our only sure bulwark against the outrageous slings and arrows. Perhaps other centuries could do without it. Not the twentieth. It permeates everything, from the schools where it may cause confusion, to the depths of the philosophy of the man who has no philosophy.

The belief, then, that change is the normal condition, and to be regarded with confidence rather than apprehension, has to be

accepted as a fact of this century. Reasons may be adduced why it should theoretically not be so, or with greater probability why it should not remain so; nevertheless, self-examination proves it. Nor can this be accounted a surprising or unusual thing, when we consider that it is a belief grounded in at least several centuries of experience.

Of the many ways in which the modern world thinks differently from the medieval, probably the attitude towards change must be most important. It is a nice point, whether medieval Europe was not more modern than the modern world is medieval, but it cannot be denied that change in that early time was slower, and opinion less inclined to accept its inevitability. For this, a man must be able to look back and see signs of it. The early Fathers could do it, for they could contrast, within the short historical memory of their time, the darkness of the pagan world with the light of Christianity; but the later churchmen, not: for them the light shone less brilliantly and seemed almost to be going out, and good change was change back, other change to be resisted. By these and other circumstances the leading men, over a long period, were debarred from modernity. The model civilisation was that which had fallen. Society altered little from one man's lifetime to the next. Important technological developments did not revolutionise the manner of living. As a result, change was ignored, and the natural assumption held the field that as dress, behaviour, work and so on then were, so they had always been.

At a date on which historians have not been able to agree, but certainly some time between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries, this opinion gave place to the modern one. In writings of the sixteenth century the modern outlook is prominent. 'Once they thought of a golden age, then a bronze, then an iron. At length clay followed. But this idea must be adjusted. The age which they called golden if compared with ours would seem but iron. Suddenly such a wealth of knowledge shone forth, such fertility of talents existed, as no age ever excelled. I am more inclined to admire our wealth than to perceive our poverty.' Gunpowder, printing, clocks; nature imitated or destroyed at will, giving way at all points to the human onslaught. The time was ripe for many to run to and fro and knowledge be increased, and for diffident men, 'of a prudent and exact turn of thought', to stand down before the optimists who took all knowledge for their province. So through Bodin and Bacon to Descartes. By the time of Newton, when it was clear that the enlarging circumference of light meant also a wider contact with darkness, the first flush of confidence had waned. But that change was accepted, and without doubt had been good, underlay the reformatory conceit of the Enlightenment, as the social people put into practice the idea of

the early scientists. Then the looms and steam-engines, and the magnificent, tawdry, enviable and despised nineteenth century came in with a bound.

Change continuous, change good: Progress. After a lapse of centuries, optimism became again Baconian in intensity, but a thousand times wider in scope. God was in His heaven and private enterprise had wings; self-help ruled; and the common man was represented in Parliament. Over huge areas of the map, comfortably red, the white man's burden was neither heavy, nor immoral, nor unprofitable. Some saw progress in morality: the world becoming daily more righteous. Some in international affairs: war less often resorted to. Some in social conditions: sanitation and education improved. Some in politics; it was a great age for democracy. All, except the feeblest, in their material environment: the standard of living was rising. All, except the very few, shared one sentiment in common, an optimistic faith in Progress. This principle the philosophers might elevate or qualify, and the underdogs, chartists or marxists, might deny; but on the whole it was a middle-class and an English century, and what the English middle classes saw were advances in their material well-being. A country and a business could expand. A man could get on. The aristocrats and intellectuals acquiesced, the working people were more concerned to imitate than to criticise their employers. It is easy to laugh at those serene optimists. But they were right. Any more stringent philosophy would have flown in the face of Providence, which at that time favoured the middle class everywhere, western Europe generally, and England in particular.

Had the nineteenth-century idea of Progress stopped at that point, all would have been well, and we spared the disillusion which followed it. But human thought being always chiefly concerned with the future, it judges what is to come by what has been, and what has been by what it hopes will be; and this convenient sort of mutual reciprocation caused the nineteenth century to see the future rosy. Their horizon was clear, and no storm threatened. Squalls there were — a colonial war, a naval incident, a diplomatic threat — of which the rapid passing was more apparent than the ominous origins. No conclusion could plausibly be drawn except that, given the voice of reason, a show of force and a round table, all problems were soluble. As with great matters, so with small. Europe, England, Manchester and Smith all prospered together, and, it seemed for ever. They thought that what was, would be. They believed in the inevitability of Progress.

This dictum, and this alone, made the Achilles heel of the nineteenth-century idea, and distinguished it also from the similar ideas of some previous centuries. When the moralists of the nineteenth century

believed Progress to include moral betterment they were on safe ground, for morals by nature are incapable of technical proof and disproof. But when the century concerned itself explicitly with the future, that is when it rationalised its actual circumstances into laws of evolution concerning human beings and human institutions, it laid itself open to contradiction by the future. Events have in fact belied it. And it is the error here which has put Progress into such bad odour with the twentieth-century intellectual who hates and avoids the word, not because he disapproves of social improvement, not even because he disagrees what social improvement is, still less because he does not find change normal; but simply because he cannot regard good change (that is, Progress) as inevitable. When, therefore, we say that Progress is dead, we mean that it has lost an arm. The aberration of theory which was induced by the exceptional circumstances of the nineteenth century having been discarded, we find ourselves back to normal in our thought as in physical reality.

Now it is not the first time that this has happened. When the kingdom of heaven failed to materialise, when the natural world resisted human encroachment, the same reaction from superlative confidence took place. History (so far as it goes) is clear, that the fortuitous waning of excessive confidence does not necessarily destroy all belief in Progress. Its intensity fluctuates, according as the spheres of life in which large groups of people are chiefly interested appear to be subject to greater or less change for the better. So long as the experience of change has been part of the communal memory, its desirability has never been forgotten, being nailed up, so to speak, by the teleological instinct of human nature. The existence and force of the idea of progress may therefore be said to depend on three factors: the direction of interest, the communal memory and the circumstances present at the time. We notice on the one hand that since the time when the world became modern, none of these has turned against Progress, so that the idea has lasted and in the main grown stronger. On the other, clearly no idea is self-perpetuating. So that the surface probabilities tell us nothing, and we must rely on internal evidence. For twentieth-century Progress to persist three things are necessary: first, people must remain chiefly interested in material things; second, they must continue to remember the bad old days; and third, circumstances which they cannot control must not persistently thwart their good intentions. Obviously these factors are closely interdependent. More exactly the first two, acts of God and natural catastrophes excepted, depend largely on the third.

If material things should cease to hold our chief attention, then the idea of Progress as we know it will cease to exist. It is not impossible that this should happen. A new Messiah, a tremendous religious revival, could presumably turn our thought into other

channels. Nor is it inconceivable that we shall in fifty years think more of physical beauty than of physical prosperity. Indeed, one can already point to small stirrings in these spheres which may well, for all we know, be the beginning of great movements: an incipient religious revival, a new worship of natural beauty, a rather questionable attention to the culture of the body, a widening interest in art. Any and all these things may produce their saviour of mankind. They are unknown quantities and, but for one sure consideration, we should have to leave them so. It is not possible that human opinion should thus swing of its own accord. Only if the material world should let us down, if disappointment continually follow hope in the material world, if for all our efforts at improvement we should see ourselves sinking back into poverty and discomfort, then opinion, through a natural process of self-compensation, may and will look to other things. This probably, to some extent, is already happening, for there are at this moment large groups of people who already need some such compensation. But to happen on a large scale — that is a different matter, requiring a more decided push than circumstances seem yet to exert.

What can we say of the communal memory? Granted that our interests remain material, so long as we remember the bad old days we shall continue to believe in Progress. Now this memory, so to speak, consists of three layers: first, what we learn from books about the distant past; second, what we learn from our fathers about their past; third, what we learn from experience about our own immediate past. To the first we must give little importance, when we observe that historical interpretation is itself so changeable. The second is a bigger factor, for our fathers are alive and they bring us up and they talk; therefore the two-thirds overlap of generations, other things being equal, ensures a long communal memory. But our fathers also forget, and change their views, and are in general subject, though less than the young, to the pressure of changing circumstances; so that we may say of the memory of a man between sixty and seventy years old that it is not firm and rigid but firm and elastic. But the memory of a man between twenty and thirty is not even firm, it is a pliable shapeless lump of which impressions of the last few years are just beginning to make intelligible shape. These impressions harden it out. If they conflict with the history books, or with the tales of the previous generation, the latter, by outright rejection less often than by ingenious distortion, lose. Of the three layers of memory, personal experience takes first place, because it is the only experience which seems real, and is therefore the experience on which men act. While in times called normal it may work in a gentlemanly and placid way, in times of stress and turbulence it may behave with the vigour of a bull in a china shop. Certainly the communal memory

finds nothing sacred. It can forget anything in a man's lifetime, and most things, given cause enough, in a generation. With unpalatable facts it deals in two ways, either by calling in the teleological instinct to sugar-coat them, or if this be impossible by forgetting them. Such is memory's ingenuity in its task of helping to make human life bearable, that it never fails to supply new things when the old are inexpedient. While life runs smoothly, memory serves us well, and faithfully hands down the old errors, in recognisable shape, from generation to generation. Presented, however, with too many bitter pills, it will erase, substitute, distort and lie. Like any old friend, it is not to be relied on for truth. It too is the servant of circumstances.

The way in which circumstances may destroy our material Progress are, with the usual reservations against flood, earthquake dessication and the direct intervention of God, necessarily themselves material; either by blowing us to bits quickly or more slowly by sapping at our foundations with a permanent economic slump. These dangers cast shadows before them. For two hundred years we have not been so afraid, nor has security seemed so desirable and faraway a goal; and our progress has a fighting, striving, Baconian spirit. But suppose that for ten, twenty years, for a generation, we strive without success — suppose that the new houses cannot be built, that the food ration tightens, that our shoes wear thin and our clothes go threadbare — what course can we take then, except to live on past glories in a nostalgic day-dream, and laugh at new Nineveh? Neither our memory, nor the present direction of our interests, would survive *that*. The bomb would be less painful, but no more sure. Men and women would draw on their power of compensation until, laboriously but surely, the spirit of a new age was brought into being . . . Suppose, on the other hand, a better case: peace, and the benefits of a new source of energy, another great stride in the advance against Nature; suppose the successful consolidation of western Europe in its new boundaries, and the ideal of the nation-state weakening. If our fear is great enough, it may move mountains. Fear must be the prime mover, it seems; and perhaps there will not be born a mouse. And if the more amiable prospect comes to be realised, what course may we expect that our thought will take? Far from being compelled to play us tricks, memory will keep fresh the times which were bad and have been overcome. Our interest will have no reason to divert itself into new channels. We shall continue to think Progress desirable and more and more practicable, until we finally assume it to be inevitable, dress it in a fine morality — and so go the full cycle. 'But it is not good to look too long upon these turning wheels of vicissitude, lest we become giddy. And as for the philology of them, that is but a circle of tales, and therefore not fit for this writing.'

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## BOOK REVIEWS

GEORGE SEAVER: *Albert Schweitzer, The Man and His Mind.*  
*Black, 18s. net.*

The author of this book has set himself the somewhat ambitious task of giving a full account of Albert Schweitzer's life and thought; and, if the experience of one of his readers is any criterion, his work will be received with very mixed feelings — admiration and very real gratitude; but at the same time a certain disappointment and even irritation.

He deserves our admiration, if for nothing else, at least for the courage with which he has undertaken a task difficult enough to have deterred a lesser — or indeed a greater — man than himself. It must always be difficult to write a full-scale biography of any man while he is still alive, and has not completed his work. But in the case of a man so variously gifted as Schweitzer the biographer's task is still more difficult. He has to deal with a man who is not only a practical genius — organist, surgeon, administrator and much else — but also a biblical critic, an interpreter of Bach, and a philosopher of prophetic insight into the problems that beset civilisation. And, as if all that were not enough, Schweitzer is also a man of rare sympathy, sensitiveness and beauty of character. His biographer has tried to do justice to these many different aspects of his subject, and is entitled to the gratitude of his readers for the measure of success which he has achieved in his very difficult task.

But his readers will soon perceive that his success, such as it is, is due, not so much to the author's skill as a writer, or insight into his subject, as to the prudent policy which he has followed of quoting extensively — though not always with complete accuracy — from Schweitzer's own writings, in his accounts both of his life and of his thought.

J. N. S.

DONALD W. MITCHELL: *History of the Modern American Navy.*  
*New York, Knopf; London, John Murray, 21s. net.*

Mr. Mitchell's book relates the history of the American Navy from 1883 up to and including Pearl Harbour. It is a non-technical account, reliable and non-controversial in its narrative and conclusions.

Perhaps it is slightly misleading to refer to 'the utter collapse of America's naval strength' in the 1880s and 1890s (p. 9), for this implies an earlier golden age; whereas, in fact, in this sphere no less than in such other matters as currency, banking, taxation and public

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finance, the United States never developed in proportion to their potentialities up to the first World War. Nevertheless, Mr. Mitchell is fully aware of American naval backwardness in the 1880s and 1890s and produces much evidence on it in the various fields of strategy and tactics as well as of organisation.

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It is too much to claim that Mr. Mitchell's style is excellent, or the book highly readable. But it is certainly reasonably readable and consistently intelligible.

F. H. H.

SIR JAMES JEANS: *The Growth of Physical Science.*

*Cambridge University Press, 12s. 6d. net.*

In this posthumous work Sir James Jeans attempts to trace for the general reader the main outlines of the history of physical science, including mathematics and astronomy, from 'remote beginnings' before the Greeks to the present day. The subject is treated in isolation from other developments in thought and society, and for this reason one is left with a certain feeling of unreality not unusual after reading a history of science. This, no doubt, would also be the justification of the small number of pages (19 out of 357) devoted to the period between 642 and 1453 under the title 'Science in the Dark Ages': The earlier Greek section and the section on physical science since the sixteenth century although elementary are, however, clear, interesting and substantially accurate. As a popular book this may be well recommended.

A. C. C.

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For an appreciation of the philosophic atmosphere of China today, Dr. Fung's book may be heartily recommended. As a sympathetic survey of Chinese philosophy in general, it must be recommended with more reserve.

R. H. R.

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